

I'M GIVING
THE DISGRACED
NOBLE LADY I RESCUED
A **CRASH COURSE** IN
NAUGHTINESS

1

I'll Spoil Her with Delicacies and Style to Make
Her the Happiest Woman in the World!

Fukada Sametarou
ART Sakura Miwabe



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Prologue

Nestled deep in the forest was a mansion where tonight, like every night, there was an ever-so-ghastly course of training underway.

“Mwa ha ha... There’s no way out for you, Charlotte.”

The room was dark. Not even a single shaft of moonlight escaped through the drawn curtains. In the middle of the room stood a young man holding a candle. He seemed to be in his early twenties. Though his face, lit by the glow of the candle, had nice, even features, his eyes were strangely sharp. The color of his hair was unusual: half black, half white. And his eyes were as red as blood. Tall and thin, clad in a threadbare robe, he had the look of a typical sorcerer. His mouth was twisted up into a spine-chilling smile, and a timid girl or a child might have screamed in terror to behold him.

“P-Please, no,” a girl whimpered, cowering in her chair. “You can’t do this to me...”

She was beautiful, and a little younger than him, with wavy golden hair that hung down to her waist, and pastel blue eyes as clear as the summer sky. She wore pajamas made of unmistakably high-quality silk. With her delicate, doll-like features and perfectly proportioned figure, she glowed with an air of grace and elegance. She was the very picture of a girl of gentle birth.

But now, her charming features were contorted with fear. In the gloomy room, the single candle light shone on the table in front of her. Staring at the thing placed on it, she cried out again in dismay.

“Think it over, Allen, please! This really is too naughty...”

“Hmph. According to whom?” Allen sneered sarcastically. “I’m the master of this mansion, and you’re under my rule. Whether you like it or not, I will not allow you to disobey your master’s orders, Charlotte.”

“How could you?!”

Allen roared with laughter. “Forget it, there’s nothing you can do!” He felt the thrill of intimidating a defenseless girl as Charlotte sat quivering helplessly. She could only stare at the thing on the table in terror. Taking advantage of her powerless position, he goaded her again. “Now! Go on...gobble up this ramen as your late-night snack!”

What was it he pointed at? A steamy bowl of curly, yellow noodles steeped in a thick, white soup. On the bed of noodles sat juicy slices of pork that had been stewed so long they would melt in your

mouth, a marinated egg, and a garnish of fermented bamboo shoots called “menma.” This dish, known as “ramen,” had spread from the East and was becoming something of a craze in this country.

The rich scent of the soup wafted from the bowl, tantalizing Charlotte until her stomach growled softly. But she still resisted, shaking her head weakly, her face terribly pale. “You know it’s already time for me to go to bed! How can I eat something so heavy so late at night? It’s wicked!”

“Hmph. Wait till you see what I have in store for you.” Still smirking, Allen turned and drew up a wheeled cart from behind him to reveal the extent of his diabolical scheme. “Look at this! I bought lots of ice cream! Feast on it as much as you like for dessert!”

She gasped. “And are those...toppings on the side?!”

“As quick as ever, Charlotte,” he chuckled. “You guessed it.”

All kinds of toppings—a colorful collection of fruits in bite-size pieces, chocolate chip cookies, a range of syrups like honey, and so on—lined the cart. And the vital ice cream itself boasted a selection of vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry flavors. It was an assortment that would have made any child, or adult for that matter, bubble with excitement.

“You can make your own sundaes to your heart’s content. And once you’ve polished off everything, we’ll play board games together! We’re pulling a full-on all-nighter!”

“B-But if we do that, it’ll be so hard to wake up in the morning!”

“Too bad—there’ll be no such thing as ‘morning’ for you. You know why?” He paused. “Because you’re fated to be with me...sleeping in and lazing about till noon!”

“Oh no!”

“Yes, yes, cry all you want!” he cackled. “That scream is exactly what I desired!” Distant thunder rumbled outside, punctuating his howl of laughter. A flash of lightning made the soup gleam even more in the dark.

At long last, the girl broke down and, murmuring an apology to God, reached for the chopsticks and the porcelain spoon.

This is the tale of an evil sorcerer who led a pitiful girl astray...down the path of pure naughtiness.

Chapter 1: The Evil Sorcerer Takes in an Uncommonly Wicked Woman

It all began on an early spring day.

“Hullo there, Dark Lord! Here’s the day’s mail for ya!”

That morning, the usual mail carrier had rung the doorbell at Allen’s mansion. She had fluffy, cobalt green hair, with a beast’s ears of the same color poking out through the tufts, and a long, kinked tail sprouting from the small of her back. Dressed in a postal worker’s uniform, she was a feline demi-human—a common species in this country.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Miach? Don’t call me by that name.”

She tilted her head to one side with a troubled meow. “But it’s not just me, ya know. *Everybody* I know calls ya Dark Lord ‘cause you’re the Dark Lord.”

“Tch. Whatever, just give me the mail.”

“Yessiree.” She handed over two letters, one package, and a roll of newspaper. “So, anything for me to take today?” she asked.

“Just this one,” said Allen, passing her a large box. “The usual potions. Careful not to break the bottles.”

“Why, of course. ‘Fast, Safe, and Super Cute’ is the motto of the Satyrus Delivery Service, after all!” she replied, giving him a brisk salute.

Though she liked to joke around, her work was reliable. Allen had entrusted parcel deliveries to her many times in the past, and there hadn’t been a single issue.

After taking care of the package and the confirmation slip, Miach cocked her head again. “Why don’t cha just live in the city? With these powerful potions of yours, it’d be so much easier for ya to rack up money there.”

Allen fell silent.

There was a large town to the east of this forest. The delivery service Miach worked for was based there, and it was a densely populated, bustling city. Allen made a living by selling potions to the local magic shop, but—just as Miach said—it would have been much simpler if he lived there himself. The cost of delivery was an expense that couldn’t be overlooked, as it ate into his finances to a somewhat painful degree. There was, however, one big problem.

Allen looked down at his toes and mumbled, "There's...too many people in the city."

"Ever the misanthrope, aren't cha?" Miach sighed with a shrug.

Allen's mansion stood in the middle of the forest, some ways off the main road, so hardly anyone came wandering by. The only people who visited him were traders or workers like Miach. In other words, for an antisocial person like Allen, it was the ideal spot.

But Miach was dissatisfied. "Aren't cha only twenty-one, Dark Lord?" she went on. "You're still young, even for a human. You've gotta get out and live! Before ya know it, you'll be all dry and wrinkled, a lonely grandpa."

He snorted. "That's none of your concern."

"See? Look at ya, so quick to furrow your brow. No wonder the townsfolk call ya the Dark Lord."

It was only natural that people would gossip about the malicious-looking wizard who lived on the edge of town. Allen let out a heavy sigh. "Why do I have to be called by such a dishonorable name just because I live by myself? As if that wasn't enough, some kids have started sneaking around to test their courage these days."

"Oh dear, that's a handful."

"Indeed," Allen nodded, burying his face in his hands. "There's lots of wild animals around, and it's far too dangerous for children to be out here by themselves. I try to warn them every time, but they always run away screaming."

"You're a tricky guy, Dark Lord," Miach said with a wry smile. "A misanthropic hermit who's good-natured to boot."

Allen did have a complicated personality. He didn't want to interact with people, but he couldn't turn his back on them either.

"Well, anyhow, you should find a hobby, or something worthwhile to do! I'll be off then, see ya tomorrow!" With a wave of her hand, Miach started sprinting away.

"Like I said, it's none of your business," Allen muttered with a shrug, watching her go. She disappeared from sight in no time.

"Now then. About time for breakfast..." As he turned to go inside, the newspaper slipped from his hands and fluttered open on the ground. A provocative headline was splashed across the front page: *The Wicked Woman Disappears from the Neighboring Country! Is She Fleeing Across the Border?*

When he knelt to pick it up, he noticed someone lying right in front of the mansion, partially hidden by the overgrown grass.

"Hey," he called to the figure. "Who's there?"

But the stranger didn't budge.

Puzzled, Allen slunk closer. "A woman?"

The figure lying face-down in the grass was a young girl. She was

elegant and beautiful, wearing what must have been a magnificent dress. She looked like a classic princess who'd walked right out of a fairy tale. But her dress was tattered, and her face ashen. Though her eyes were closed, the shallow breaths that escaped through her pasty lips indicated that she was still alive, though only just.

"A runaway, maybe...or did she flee from an abductor?"

When he began to gently lift her, her long eyelashes quivered, and she let out a little moan.

Allen hesitated for a moment, then sighed in resignation. "I guess I have no choice. I'll take care of her until she wakes." He gathered her up in his arms and started toward the house.

He barely moved a step before a man's vicious shriek pierced the silence of the woods. At the same time, the blade of a sword glinted behind Allen. The silver blade sliced through its target in a single stroke—but Allen vanished into thin air.

"What? He disappeared?!" the assailant sputtered.

"Well, isn't that a grand greeting?" Allen nonchalantly called from behind his assailant. He'd performed an elementary piece of illusionary magic, also known as the Art of Replacement.

Allen didn't recognize the flustered man who wheeled around to face him. However, the coat of arms engraved on his armor was familiar—in fact, he knew it all too well. Still holding the girl in his arms, he sneered at the man, raising an eyebrow. "Oh? I take it you've come across the border, and you belong to the Royal Guards directly under the Royal Family. Now, what does an impressive fellow like you want with me, all the way out here?"

The soldier said nothing. He glared at Allen and slowly raised his sword toward him. Three more soldiers emerged from the shadows of the trees, each heavily equipped for battle, and with piercing gazes fixed on Allen.

The air grew tense, but Allen only shrugged. "Traveling in packs, are you? Well, if you're here to sell me something, I'm not interested."

"Hand her over," the soldier wielding the sword commanded in a low voice, ignoring Allen's facetious remark. "That woman is a felon who brought shame to our country. If you try to protect her, you'll face the consequences."

"A felon?" Allen peered down at her sleeping face. Her fragile yet beautiful features were clearly a world apart from such a villainous label. But, at the same time, the soldiers seemed perfectly serious.

"We have orders to capture her, dead or alive. If you cooperate and surrender her to us now, we will leave you in peace. That's a promise."

"Hmm. Makes sense." Everything about this smelled like trouble. "If that's the way it is...I decline," Allen sneered.

“What?!” the soldier shouted, taken aback.

On the one hand, Allen had these shady soldiers, and on the other, this poor, frail girl. Of course he would side with the latter without hesitation. It was simply human nature. And if she did turn out to be a criminal, all he'd have to do is apologize and hand her over later.

Of course, siding with the girl meant Allen's only course of action just then was...to go into battle.

“You think you can take us on by yourself?!” one of the soldiers shouted as they circled Allen.

“That's *my* line.” Allen's lips twisted into a smirk as he looked at each of the soldiers.

Allen could tell at a glance that they had earned their right to wear their country's coat of arms through intense military training. Weapons at the ready, the soldiers stood in perfect form, leaving no opening for an attack.

As for Allen, both of his hands were full, carrying the girl. Objectively speaking, he was absolutely doomed. With all this in mind...the disadvantage suited him just fine. “If you think a tiny band of elitists like you can take me down...think again!”

One of the soldiers rushed forward to attack, but let out a shriek as Allen knocked the man off his feet with a sweep of his leg. Allen rammed his elbow into the soldier's back, slamming him into the ground. As if the yell was a starting bell, the rest of the soldiers advanced at once—but Allen was faster.

Ice Bind!

A flash of light shot over the ground, and two soldiers toppled forward, their feet now bound to the ground with ice crystals. Allen had cast a spell to manipulate ice. Though it didn't have the power to kill or injure opponents, it was highly effective for capturing them.

Now, only the first soldier with the sword was left. “A nonverbal spell?!” His eyes widened in surprise, but he remained calm. He thrust his sword out, precisely aiming for the vital spot. In one swift motion, Allen stepped forward, dodged the blade by a hair's breadth, and kicked up the soldier's chin, knocking him back.

“To finish it off...*Ice Bind!*”

All the soldiers were under Allen's control now. Pinned to the ground, one of them stared up at him, stuttering, “Th-That white and black hair! You can't be—!”

“I'm not here to make idle talk. *De Lusion.*”

When Allen snapped his fingers, the soldiers' eyes went blank. He questioned them in a quiet tone as they stared vacantly into empty space. “Now. What happened here? Tell me.”

The soldiers droned their reply, each picking up where the last left off.

“We...searched all over the forest for the woman...”

“But there were no more traces of her...”

“So we concluded she was eaten by a beast...”

“And decided to return to our country for the present.”

“Excellent!” Allen shouted with delight at his own workmanship. He knew that if he killed these men, the next batch of soldiers would be sure to follow sooner or later. It was simply more efficient to trick them like this.

When he melted away the magic ice, the soldiers staggered to their feet. They didn’t show a hint of animosity toward Allen and were completely oblivious to the young woman in his arms.

“Off you go, then, it’s that way. And don’t come back.”

Obediently, the soldiers tottered back the way they came. The fog in their head would clear up soon, and by that time, they would have forgotten all about their encounter with Allen. Then they would return to their country and report exactly what they had just recited. For the time being, the most immediate problem was out of the way.

“A felon, huh... Sounds like there might be a complicated story behind this.” Allen let out a small sigh as he looked at the face of the sleeping girl.



Still holding her in his arms, Allen brought the girl into his house.

He headed to the living room, which was a mess, with moldy pieces of bread and shriveled herbs scattered over various surfaces. Piles of junk, consisting of objects that were somewhere between garbage and bric-a-brac, covered the floor. But there was one corner of the room with a leather sofa that was just tidy enough for human habitation. It was Allen’s favorite spot, where he liked to read, have a nap, and spend most of his free time. He gently placed the runaway girl on this sofa. She was still fast asleep.

“Right... I suppose I’ll just wait for her to wake up.” Allen gazed at her face and stroked his chin thoughtfully. “She doesn’t look anything like a felon that would make a country take such dramatic action. Though, as they say, never judge a book by the cover...” Either way, there was nothing he could do until she awakened. He idly picked up the morning paper and flapped it open.

The top foreign news was all over the front page. It gave an account of a scandal surrounding the second prince of the Kingdom of Neils, the neighboring country. According to the article, his fiancée was quite a wicked woman. She had been indulging in a luxurious lifestyle using the taxpayers’ money. On top of that, not only had she held secret rendezvous with innumerable men, she had even schemed to assassinate the first prince in order to secure her place as future

queen. The second prince had exposed all of her evil deeds and saved the kingdom from her wickedness. This revelation had thrown the whole nation into a frenzy. The fiancée in question had vanished, and the authorities were searching everywhere for her. A helpful portrait of the lady was printed with the article, accompanied by a note urging readers to get in touch with any information.

“Hm?” Just as Allen raised his eyebrows at the portrait, there was a murmur from the girl. “Ah, you’re awake.”

She woke right on time. Her heavy eyelids fluttered open as she slowly rose to a sitting position. She looked around nervously, and when she saw Allen next to her, she flinched. “Oh! Wh-Who are you?”

Allen smiled gently to put her at ease. “Just someone who found you collapsed outside and brought you home.”

He rummaged around for a pot and some tea leaves in the mounds of clutter, and he soon served her a cup of black tea.

Hesitantly, the girl took the chipped tea cup. She took a tiny sip from the lukewarm tea and breathed a soft sigh. A touch of color returned to her cheeks. “I got lost in the woods,” she began in a hoarse whisper, “and I saw a mansion in the distance...so I tried to go there, and...”

“Well, you still reached your goal. This is the house you saw. You fainted just in front of it.” Allen decided not to tell her about the soldiers. There was no reason to frighten her unnecessarily.

The only people who ever visited the mansion were the mail carrier, the children who dared each other to venture close to it...or someone who lost their way. This woman was a typical case of the latter.

She still looked dazed, as if she was wandering in a dream, when he held up the newspaper to her. “Nevertheless, allow me to offer you a warm welcome—Lady Charlotte Evans, I presume?”

Charlotte became as white as a sheet.

There was no denying it. The portrait in the paper was her likeness. She was the fiancée of the second prince of Neils Kingdom, the “wicked woman” who had deceived the whole country, and the eldest daughter of Duke Evans.

“Don’t be alarmed. I’m not going to hurt you,” Allen said nonchalantly, folding the newspaper and peering into her face. Despite his words, she still shrank back warily. He went on anyway. “A long time ago, I was betrayed by some people I believed to be my friends. Since then, I’ve mastered the art of detecting lies.” He looked straight into her eyes. Her blue eyes, wavering with anxiety, showed no trace of falsehood or deception. “You’re innocent. Isn’t that right?”

Charlotte was speechless. Her eyes widened and, after a few moments, brimmed with tears.

Allen was taken aback. "H-Hey, what's wrong? Are you in pain?"

"For the first time..." she sobbed, tears pouring down her face.

Haltingly, she murmured, "You're...the first one...to believe me!"

Once the floodgates had opened, Charlotte couldn't stop weeping. Though flustered, Allen did his best to comfort her, offering her a handkerchief, pouring her more tea, and doing whatever else he could think of. Eventually, she calmed down and slowly began to tell her story.

"Everything happened...very suddenly."

Exactly a week ago, there had been a birthday party at the royal castle for Prince Cecil, the second prince of the Kingdom of Neils. As his fiancée, Charlotte, of course, was invited, and she was going around the hall, greeting the guests. She didn't exchange any words with the Prince, however.

"We were engaged to be married many years ago...but we hardly ever saw each other," she explained. Even on the rare occasions they met, they had never held a conversation. Instead, he would only throw her an icy glare.

But that day, when the party was in full swing, Prince Cecil called her up to the center of the hall. As the guests and soldiers looked on, he declared not his love for her, but a revelation that was beyond belief.

"Charlotte Evans! I have investigated your countless misdeeds! Therefore...I shall annul my engagement to you with immediate effect!"

As if to add icing on the cake, the Prince described crime after crime that she had no recollection of ever committing. Each misconduct was backed by elaborately fabricated evidence, and everyone in the room soon believed everything he claimed.

Not even her own family came to her aid. Although it wasn't publicly known, Charlotte was born out of wedlock, between the Duke and his mistress. As his lawful wife hadn't borne him any children, the Evans family had adopted her in her infancy. Several years later, however, he married a new wife, who gave birth to his legitimate heir. Ever since then, Charlotte had been treated as an outcast in the family, and when Prince Cecil had made those false accusations against her, no one in the Evans family—not even the servants—took her side.

She was about to be taken to prison, but...

"I managed to escape the house when the guard wasn't looking."

"Indeed..." Allen stroked his chin.

It was quite a simple plot, really. In all likelihood, Prince Cecil had been loath to marry Charlotte, either because she was an illegitimate child, or because he'd taken a liking to another woman.

His exact motive didn't matter. In any case, he wanted Charlotte out of his way. If he exposed her as a wicked woman, he would be able to banish his inconvenient fiancée and win public acclaim at the same time—a clever maneuver of killing two birds with one stone.

Doesn't change the fact that it's disgusting, Allen thought with a slight sneer.

Unaware of what was running through his head, Charlotte gave him a deep bow. "I'm grateful for your help. But I think they'll be coming after me very soon—even the newspaper in this country has reported this story, after all. I won't give you any more trouble. Once I rest a little bit, I'll set out at once—"

"One question," Allen interrupted, holding up his index finger. "Are you good at cleaning?"

Charlotte stared back at his sudden question. "Um...?"

"Answer me."

When he pressed her, she spoke timidly. "Ummm, I think I can clean as well as an average person... Why do you ask?"

"Good. Perfect answer." Allen gave her a pat on her shoulder. "All right, Charlotte. You're hired."

"Huh?!"

"Stay here. You'll be a nominal live-in maid."

Her job would include all kinds of housework. He would remunerate her, of course, along with three meals a day plus sweets. Since his mansion was excessively spacious, with many empty rooms, there was plenty of space for one more resident. If needed, there were even multiple toilets and bathrooms.

When he concluded his rough explanation, Charlotte came to herself and went into a panic. "Were you listening to my story?! I'm a wanted person!"

"I suppose you're right—it's entirely foolish of me to shelter you." The cool, rational part of his mind pleaded with him to withdraw his offer immediately. Her presence spelled nothing but trouble. In fact, for a misanthrope like Allen, who lived deep in the forest by himself precisely because he didn't want to get involved with anyone else, Charlotte might as well have been a messenger of misfortune.

Even so, he couldn't bring himself to abandon her.

"As I said...I've also been betrayed in the past."

"You too...?"

"My name is Allen. Allen Crawford." He looked straight into her eyes with a thin smile.

The incident had occurred about three years ago. Allen had been on a journey to see the world when he came across an adventuring party. They were about to embark on an expedition around the world, they said, and invited him to join their group. Apparently, they had

been on the lookout for a competent wizard.

Because he had a streak of genius in him, few people had truly understood Allen before then. There was hardly anyone he could call a friend. And so, delighted by their welcome, he readily agreed to join their fellowship, dreaming of the exciting journey to come and the bright future to be shared with his new comrades.

However, as it turned out, they had only approached Allen for their own selfish gain.

“They used me to uncover an ancient temple that had lain hidden under a spell. They wanted the treasure inside. As soon as I lifted the spell, they threw me away—left me to die surrounded by a pack of demons.”

“Oh...how awful!”

“Well, what’s past is past. I was young. An easy target.” He shook his head with a wry grin. Though he’d managed to escape alive, the experience had made him even more mistrustful.

He took Charlotte’s hand and held it softly. “Back then, there was no one around to give me a helping hand. So I...I can’t abandon you when you’re suffering in a similar situation.”

“Allen...” Charlotte’s eyes were wet with tears.

By the by—all of Allen’s ex-comrades were now living in a prison in this country. After hunting down every scrap of evidence for their crimes, he had captured and presented them to the administration of justice. And while he was at it, he had cast layers upon layers of curses on each of them, so by now, they were likely having a grand old time in prison, suffering from chronic insomnia, headaches, and diarrhea.

Whenever he remembered this fact, Allen relished the taste of every meal, seasoned with satisfaction. On top of that, apparently, the group had been wreaking havoc across the country, so the country had given him a handsome reward for turning in the criminals. Thanks to the bounty, Allen was able to buy this mansion in cash and live a peaceful, secluded life in retirement.

At the end of the day, his mistrust in people may have been aggravated, but he had already gotten more than his share of revenge. In other words, it wasn’t quite accurate to say there was no one around to give him a helping hand back then; rather, he had made light work of cleaning up the matter himself.

Nevertheless, he kept the rest of the story a secret from Charlotte. She must have been moved by his words, coming from a man who had also experienced a malicious betrayal.

Yet she still shook her head. “B-But I’ll only bring trouble to you, Allen! I really am grateful, but...I can’t accept your offer!”

“Right...then I have no choice.” It seemed she was a rather

stubborn girl. In that case... “It’s time for my last resort.”

Allen snapped his fingers. A glowing, red insignia appeared over his shirt, right around his heart. It was the ominous sign made by a curse that Allen excelled at casting. He grinned triumphantly at Charlotte, who looked bewildered.

“I’ve just cast a death curse on myself.”

Charlotte stared blankly at him. “What?”

Allen pointed a finger straight at her and fired off, “If you don’t agree to work here, I won’t undo the curse! Which means my heart will stop in exactly three minutes!”

“Whaaat?!” Her scream rang throughout the house.



It was music to his ears. He beamed even wider and goaded her on. “Quick! Decision time! If you don’t say it, an innocent citizen will lose his life!”

“How is this even happening?! You sound like a villain...but you’re a good person who’s trying to help me, aren’t you?!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! I’m virtue incarnate, of course! Come now, what are you going to do, Charlotte? Two minutes, thirty-one seconds left! I might add, it’s already getting hard to breathe!”

“P-Please! Don’t hurt yourself like this!”

In less than a minute, Charlotte consented to living in this mansion—albeit with a pale face, and in tears.

And this was how Allen rescued a disgraced noble lady on the brink of death.

Chapter 2: Naughty Lessons for a Helpless Girl

Three days after her rescue, Charlotte stood in the living room and asked, “Well...what do you think?”

“Brilliant!” Allen exclaimed in delight, surveying the sparkling clean room.

The garbage dump of a room had undergone a miraculous transformation into a habitable space. The floor was now visible, and there wasn’t a speck of dust to be seen. The clean windows let in the soft sunshine, allowing the occupants the luxury of being able to tell the time of day.

“I must say, you’ve done an admirable job. Not what I’d expect from a daughter of a duke.”

“I...helped out with a lot of chores back home,” she replied with a melancholy smile.

Allen had forced her to rest for three days after her arrival, and now she had a much healthier complexion and a lovely sheen to her hair. Had she put on a dress, she would have looked stunning, but at present, she was dressed like an ordinary village girl, in a drab blouse and a long skirt. On top of that, her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows, and she was holding a dirty wiping cloth. Yet, the whole outfit suited her somehow, and Allen could forget that she came from a noble family.

She said her mother was a mistress, he thought. Seeing how efficient she is at cleaning, I can imagine how she must’ve been treated at home. Perhaps she was only a “lady” in title. In reality, she might have been living like a servant among her noble family. Allen, however, had no interest in questioning her about this. And Charlotte didn’t bring it up either.

She looked around the room and tilted her head. “But all I did was polish the floor. You used magic to clear away all the things for me, Allen.”

“True,” Allen agreed. He had incinerated all the junk on the floor. Since the spell burned everything without leaving ashes, all Charlotte had to do was wipe away the dust and grime.

“And you even helped me with the wiping too... Are you sure you need me here?”

“Why, of course,” Allen nodded solemnly. “As you can see, I have

no life skills. When I'm by myself, I don't even think of cleaning. I'm confident that if you hadn't shown up, I would've lived in that heap of garbage till my dying day."

"I don't think it's anything to boast about..." Charlotte said with a slightly troubled smile. But she balled her fists and eagerly announced, "Um, in any case, we're done with cleaning! What should I do next?"

"Let's see..." Allen mulled it over. Then, he said simply, "You're done for today."

"What?"

"Feel free to do whatever you like till dinner." He stretched out on his favorite sofa, ignoring her baffled look. "You can pick out a book from the study, or putter about in the garden. Up to you."

After a few moments of silence, she asked, "Aren't you worried I'll steal something?"

"That's fine too. There's hardly any cash in this house now."

Right after he had taken her in, Allen had gone up to the city to buy clothes and daily necessities for her. He felt a little hesitant to buy women's clothes, but with his bad reputation, a few more rumors here and there wouldn't hurt. He asked a shop attendant to choose whatever seemed fitting and bought the whole set. This sudden shopping spree left him with barely any money in the house.

Charlotte shrank at his explanation. "I-I'm sorry... It's my fault..."

"It's just an initial investment. Don't worry." Waving off her concerns, he took out a thick wad of paper from his breast pocket: a recently published research article on the theory of magic. One of his rare hobbies was to take a red pen and scrawl corrections all over an article to return it to its author. Rumor had it that he was greatly feared in scholarly circles as the "Red Pen Fiend," which made him even more meticulous in brandishing his red marker. "Anyway, I'll be working for a while. Don't interrupt me."

"Y-Yes, I understand."

Allen took note of Charlotte nodding gravely, then directed his attention to the article. He might have been a little brusque, speaking to a guest like that, but he didn't feel the need to be friendlier with her. *She's only here for a short while*, he thought. *This amount of distance should be just fine.*

Though he couldn't turn a blind eye to people in need, Allen was bad at socializing. While she might regard him favorably now out of gratitude, she would surely grow tired of being in his presence soon enough. Once she earned some money for her journey, she would disappear, and he'd never set eyes on her again.

He didn't think of this eventual outcome as a sign of ingratitude. Charlotte had her own life to live. Now that she'd escaped from her

home, she was free to go wherever she liked and make her own decisions.

When it's the right time, I'll put a bundle of money somewhere easy to steal... Smiling wryly at his own train of thought, Allen steadily became engrossed in the paper.



By the time Allen had finished marking up the article, it was already past sunset. The light from the window steeped the room in a deep, fiery red.

"Oops, lost track of time." He sat up on the sofa and froze at the sight on his living room floor.

In the middle of the orderly room, Charlotte was sitting motionless on the floor, staring down at one spot. Lit by the setting sun, she looked a little eerie.

"Uh, hello Charlotte," he blurted out in alarm.

At the sound of his voice, she looked up. "Oh! Allen." Her smile was as innocent as the one that had been playing on her face as they were cleaning.

While he felt relieved to see her face soften, he asked nervously, "Were you just...sitting there the whole time? What in the world were you doing?"

"Since you said I could do as I liked...I...um..." Charlotte paused, shyly scratching her cheek. Then she announced, "I was counting the grains in the flooring!"

"The grains...in the flooring?" Allen didn't know what else to say. True, he had told her to do whatever she wanted. What she chose to do in her spare time was none of his business. Even so—even if one had been bored out of one's wits with nothing to do—would anyone choose to count the lines in pieces of wood? Surely that was scraping the very bottom of the barrel.

"Right...Charlotte. Come here for a second."

"Y-Yes?"

Allen got up from the sofa and made her sit down in his place. Crouching down in front of her, he looked into her eyes. This was his method for detecting lies. "Charlotte, I have some questions for you. Do you have any hobbies?"

"Hobbies?" She cocked her head, puzzled, as if she had never heard the word before. For a moment, Allen worried whether she understood, but she soon hummed in contemplation. "Hmm...not in particular... I'm sorry."

"B-But then, what did you do in your spare time when you lived back home?"

"Besides my lessons for becoming a good wife, I did the

housework, like cleaning and sewing...so I didn't have much free time."

Though her story was so pitiful, she smiled brightly as she spoke. This brought a lump to his throat. He choked out another question. "What about those lessons, then? Was there anything you enjoyed?"

"Umm...I don't know about 'enjoying' them... I was always making mistakes and getting scolded, you see."

Allen decided to try a new angle. "Okay. What was the last thing that made you feel happy?"

"Let's see... Oh! I know!" Her excited tone made him feel slightly hopeful, but she went on, "About two months ago, Lady Natalia—um, my younger sister—gave me a fruit as a reward for working so hard every day! It was half spoiled...but it's very rare that I'm given such a special treat, so I was so happy!"

Allen was speechless. Wasn't that what people called bullying, or tormenting?

"Oh? Allen? Your face is getting kind of scary..."

"That's just how I look. No matter. Anyway...how old are you?"

"Um, I'm seventeen."

"Seventeen?!" He shuddered in disbelief. She was four years younger than Allen. When he was seventeen, he was still at the school of magic. He had been living a carefree life back then, bombarding the professors with questions till they got teary every day, punishing cheeky students whose attitudes were too big for their own good, blowing up multiple laboratories with his potion experiments. Though he had always reigned at the top—far above the rest when it came to his achievements in research—he had undoubtedly been nothing more than an irresponsible fool.

Compared to his teenage years, what were Charlotte's like? These should have been the most exciting days of her life, but she had neither hobbies, nor happy memories—only her exploitation at the hands of those around her. To top it off, everyone had betrayed her, and she had nearly died in this remote corner of the forest, only to be taken in by a bad-natured wizard with a malevolent look.

How can life be so cruel?! Allen despaired. He could tell from her eyes that she was only telling the truth. He knew that pity, readily offered by a stranger like him, would be an insult to her, but he couldn't help it.

"Right. I know what I'm going to do."

"Wh-What is it?" she asked, tilting her head with a worried look.

Ignoring her concern, he slowly stood up and pointed his finger straight in her face. "Charlotte. I'm going to teach you...all the naughty pleasures of this world!!!"

She couldn't speak for a few moments. "Excuse me?"

Three hours later, Allen returned to the mansion holding a huge bundle and called out, "I'm home!"

"W-Welcome back..." Charlotte came out to greet him, though she looked a little troubled.

After his bizarre declaration, he had rushed straight to the city and gone on another shopping spree. It was long past sunset now, and a clear crescent moon drifted pleasantly in the night sky.

Allen placed his haul on the living room table: four big boxes and three cloth bags. Charlotte was even more perplexed to see them laid out in front of her.

"Y-You've bought so many things...but I thought you'd used up your cash..."

"Indeed. So I sold off some of my enchanted objects. Got fifty gold coins."

"Fifty?!" Charlotte didn't know what to say. Enchanted objects were items charmed with a special spell. They could be all kinds of things—a bonfire that could never be extinguished, even when it rained, or a wand that could shoot out balls of fire just by shaking it, for example—but if these had fetched fifty gold coins, they must have been of superior quality. An average citizen could easily live on fifty gold coins for at least three months.

"B-But why so much money?!" she finally stuttered.

"Is it that shocking? For a lady from a duke's family, your sense of money is like a commoner's."

"Well, when I was little, I used to live in the countryside with my mother...but please don't change the subject!" Charlotte shook her head desperately and murmured in a trembling voice, "If you could sell them for such a high price, those enchanted objects must have been very valuable... Why did you have to part with them?"

"Simple," Allen replied. "I was in need of some cash. Besides, I have other enchanted objects, and I can always make more." Unlike potions, getting a value assessment of enchanted objects was a rather tedious business, so Allen rarely sold them unless he had a very good reason to. And this was a special case.

"Right, Charlotte. Take a seat here."

"Oh...y-yes." She sat down hesitantly in the seat he had drawn for her. Allen nodded in satisfaction, but she looked confused.

"Charlotte. You heard what I said earlier—that I'm going to teach you all the naughty pleasures of this world?"

"Yes, but...what do you mean by 'naughty pleasures'?"

"Indulgences, delights. What I had in mind was..." he gently cupped her chin in his hand and grinned, "the kind of pleasure that

goes against morality.”

“M-Morality?”

“Exactly. You see, naughty things are exhilarating. Once you try it, you’ll get hooked.”

Charlotte blinked even more in bewilderment. She looked completely lost.

“There’s not many people like you these days,” Allen went on, “honest, earnest, hardworking. I bet you’ve never rebelled against the duke’s household or even let yourself go just for fun, have you?”

“W-Well...they’re generous people, letting someone like me live with them...” she mumbled with downcast eyes. She spoke fearfully, as if she was a slave talking about her master instead of a daughter talking about her family. In truth, she had never uttered a single word of criticism about the duke’s family. Even though she had been horribly betrayed, any hint of a grudge she might hold was smothered by an overpowering sense of indebtedness and fear. To Allen’s eyes, this was most decidedly unwholesome. That was why he had promised himself to completely transform her life.

“From this day on, I’m going to teach you all the naughty things. You will wallow in those pleasures, and you will become a beast that lives by instinct alone.”

“Y-You’re scaring me, Allen...” She sounded a little frightened, but still gave him a stern look. “Besides, you’re not supposed to do bad things!”

“Don’t worry. We won’t break any laws, and we won’t bother anyone.”

“Is that really true?”

“Of course. *Everybody* does these things in secret.” Everyone—faithful wives, austere teachers, exemplary priests, and everyone else—engaged in naughty deeds behind closed doors, and they were slaves to those delights. When he told her this, she gulped.

“And...wh-what exactly are these...naughty deeds?”

“Do you want to know? I’ll show you!” Allen let go of her and turned to the boxes. In slow, salacious gestures, he began to undo the ribbons, as if he was undressing a woman.

“Now, look closely. Today’s naughty lesson is...”

He finally opened the box to reveal—

“Cakes?”

“Precisely!” Allen nodded vigorously.

Inside the box were colorful cakes of all kinds—a strawberry shortcake, a chocolate cake with smooth icing, a tart brimming with jewel-like fruits, a creamy mille-feuille with many layers of puff pastry, and so on. The list could go on forever.

“But wait till you see this!”

Allen started to open all the other boxes and bags, unveiling vibrant sweets of all colors and shapes, as well as bottles of juice. And it wasn't just sweet things he'd assembled—there was salty popcorn too. Soon the whole table looked like they were ready to host a big party. She looked on with eyes like saucers.

“Umm...what's...all this?”

“Nothing more than a naughty pleasure.”

Heedless of her bewilderment, Allen took up a bottle and cracked it open, letting out an appetizing fizz. He took a good swig of the clear soda, banged down the bottle on the table, and declared at the top of his voice, “This shall be our dinner tonight! Eat, drink, go all out!”

“What?!” Charlotte squealed. “W-We can't do that, Allen! We have to eat a proper dinner! It won't be a balanced meal with just sweets!”

“Hm, you're giving a textbook response, exactly what I expected. All the more fun to ruin you!” Allen cackled gleefully. “You showed signs of chronic malnutrition, not just a temporary lapse while you were running for your life. They never fed you more than the bare minimum, did they?”

“W-Well...”

“Looks like I hit the nail on the head. To keep up appearances, they couldn't let you starve, but they didn't have the slightest intention to let you eat well either. That's about right, isn't it?”

Only the people of the household had known the secret that she was an illegitimate child, born of a mistress. They had to treat her like a family member in public, but inside the home, she was like a lowly servant. It must have been extremely rare for her to taste even a bite of cake.

Allen put a slice on a plate—a fresh, exquisite shortcake decorated with strawberries on top. As they weren't in season, these were greenhouse strawberries, and the cake was a bit more expensive than usual. He placed a fork next to the slice and held out the plate to Charlotte.

“Look at it, doesn't it look so sweet and delicious? Apparently, it's the most popular cake at this shop.”

“Eek...” Charlotte couldn't help it; her eyes were glued to the cake.

For lunch, they had eaten only a thin stew with scraps of vegetables, specially made by Allen, with messy sunny-side up eggs and some bread from the cupboard. Naturally, she must be hungry too. Someone's stomach let out a small growl. She still shook her head, albeit feebly.

“B-But...we shouldn't. Having cakes for dinner? It must be bad for your health...” She glanced up at Allen and murmured apologetically, “Besides...I can't let you do more for me than you already have.”

“But look how pretty these cakes are. If you don’t eat them, won’t that disappoint the pastry chef?”

“Ack!”

Allen could feel her resolve wearing down. He smirked and pressed on, “By the way, who’s your employer right now?”

“It’s you, Allen...”

“Correct!” He pointed a fork at her. “Your employer’s orders are final. For tonight, you’re to feast on all this till you’re satisfied. That’s your job!”

“That’s just crazy...”

“If you resist any further, I’ll cast another death curse,” he stated, matter-of-factly, then added, “on myself, of course.”

“I told you, please don’t hurt yourself!!!” she cried out to stop him from casually cursing himself again. But she finally relented. She carefully picked up a fork from the table and gave a little nod. “I-I’ll do it... If that’s what you wish, I’ll eat this cake with gratitude.”

“Good. You should have listened to me from the beginning.” He talked like a villain, but all he wanted was to let her eat some cake. “Just to be safe, do you have any food allergies? Any chronic diseases?”

“No, I don’t... You sound like a doctor.”

“I do have a medical license, though.”

“You’re funny,” she giggled. He was only telling the truth, but she seemed to think it was a joke. In any case, the laugh loosened her up. “Okay then, I’ll have some, but...” She glanced at Allen. “You pick yours first. I’m happy with the leftovers.”

“I’ll pass. I don’t like sweets.”

“Oh!” Charlotte looked at him with round eyes. “You mean...you got all this...for me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Of course I did.”

“And you sold your precious objects just for that?! Why would you do such a thing?”

“Why?” Cocking his head, he said breezily, “Because I thought it’d make you happy.”

“Oh...” Charlotte was lost for words. Her face went totally blank. Allen was puzzled by her reaction. “What’s wrong? You’re not a fan of sweets?”

“N-No, that’s not...that’s not it...”

“Then go on, dig in.”

“Y-Yes...” She gripped her fork again somewhat awkwardly, still in a daze. “Just...for me...” she mumbled, then gulped.

Carefully, she placed the fork at the tip of the triangular slice. She cut away a tiny piece and slowly carried it to her mouth. Her movements were as slow as a turtle’s, but Allen watched her closely.

As if that one bite of cake was her last meal, she chewed it very deliberately. Eventually, he heard her swallow, and she froze as if she were in a trance.

"H-How is it? Do you like it?" Allen asked nervously. Was the cake not to her taste? Was it spoiled? He anxiously peered into her face.

After a few moments, she said, "It's...delicious."

He was about to reply, "Glad to hear it!" but the words died in his throat.

A single teardrop had rolled down her cheek. Her face crumpled, and she was desperately trying to wipe away her tears. More and more welled up in her eyes until she was sobbing. Allen didn't know what to say. She couldn't stop weeping.

As her tears fell on the table, on her lap, she murmured in a thin, quivering voice, "I can't believe someone would do something just for me...to give something to me... Only my mother and my little sister have ever done that before... It's so delicious, and I feel happy, and it's like my heart's getting squeezed..."

Her uncertain, broken words were like a cry escaping from the depths of her soul. Her painful voice kindled a fire in his heart.

Her face still streaked with tears, Charlotte gazed up at Allen. "Is it okay...for someone like me...to be so happy?"

"Don't be stupid," he muttered gruffly. Sure, it was a little expensive, but that cake had only cost about one silver coin. Such cheap happiness was nowhere near enough. "You think that slice of cake is happiness? Don't make me laugh. We're just getting started here. I'm going to teach you all the naughty pleasures of this world. You can cry all you want, but I'm not going to show you any mercy."

He'll feed her delectable dishes and take her to all kinds of magnificent places. He'll make her experience what it's like to have real fun and feel real joy until she gets tired of it. And eventually, he'll make her say, with pride, that she's the happiest person in the world.

When he told her what was in store for her, her face crumpled again. "Why...why are you so kind to a stranger like me?"

"Who knows? I don't understand it myself," he admitted honestly.

How could a slice of cake make her cry so much? When he thought about it, it made his stomach churn horribly. The feeling didn't seem to be simple pity or sympathy. It was a complicated tangle of feelings, like anger, and grief, and other things mixed in. He'd never felt such emotions before in his life. He didn't know what to call it. But such questions were of no consequence. Now that he'd made up his mind, he was going to follow through with it all the way to the end, without holding anything back. That was his motto.

"Nevertheless, I swear to you: as long as you're with me, I'll teach

you all the pleasures of this world!”

“But...I can’t return your favor.”

“No need for anything like that. You’re just getting dragged along in my hobby—think of it that way.”

Charlotte giggled through her tears. “You’re such a kind but strange person.”

Allen felt relieved to see her smiling again. When she cried, pain gripped his chest, and when she laughed, his heart warmed. These were new sensations for him too. He handed her a handkerchief, then offered her slice after slice of cake. He had only one desire—he wanted to see her smile more and more.

“Go on, eat to your heart’s content. Which one do you want next? How about this chocolate cake?”

“I-I can’t eat so much all at once... Please help me, Allen.”

“Like I said, I don’t—ah, I mean...” Noticing her face cloud over a little, he stopped himself from saying he didn’t like sweets and grabbed a fruit-laden tart for himself. “It’s a special occasion. I might as well join you.”

“Yes, please!” Charlotte beamed, “If we have it together, I’m sure it’ll taste even better.”

He was glad to see her smile. He wasn’t good with people, but with her, he thought he could keep trying his best.

But Charlotte furrowed her brows in concern. “Even with the two of us, I don’t think we can finish everything. What shall we do?”

“No problem, we can eat little by little every day.”

“Do cakes last so many days?”

“They will...” Allen muttered a spell and snapped his fingers. A transparent cube appeared around the chocolate cake. “If we stop time.”

“You really can do anything.”

“Sure.” He shrugged and sliced into his tart with a fork. “I’m a wicked and accomplished wizard. Whether it’s stopping time or corrupting a poor girl with temptations, it’s easy as pie. Hm. Not bad.” Thanks to the subtle sourness of the fruits, he could enjoy the tart too. He made a mental note to return to this shop more often. “Here, try this one. Say ahh.”

“Ah.” She timidly opened her mouth, and he gave her a bite of his tart. For a little while, she munched on it with an earnest expression, then broke into a smile, her cheeks turning a little pink. If he were to give that color a name, he’d call it, simply, “the color of happiness.”

“It’s delightful.”

“Glad to hear it.” Allen grinned back at her and devoured the rest of the tart. *Not bad at all*, he thought.

Chapter 3: Naughty Stress Relief

“Uuuuh...ah?” Allen squirmed as he yawned, bright sunlight tickling his eyelids. He gradually became conscious of soreness all over his body as he remembered where he had fallen asleep. He forced his weary body to move and pulled his face off the desk with a big yawn. “Great... When did I doze off?”

He was in his study. Bookshelves lined the walls, and the books that didn’t fit on them were stacked in piles that crowded the floor. He had holed up in there last night, deep in thought. He had been planning to go to bed when he reached a good place to leave off, but apparently, he had been so engrossed in his task that he couldn’t even recall when he’d fallen asleep.

“Hmph... Didn’t think I’d get so crazy about this. But I’ve brainstormed so many ideas now. It was time well spent.”

On the desk in front of him was a closed notebook. Allen picked it up and grinned mischievously. The cover read:

Training Plans for Charlotte: A List of Naughty Activities (In Progress)

If Charlotte herself saw it, she would’ve cried out in astonishment. Allen flipped it open. The pages were filled to the brim with his handwriting. He softly traced the first line with a finger. “The cake was a good one. It felt effective.” A flower mark for success blossomed on the line.

For Allen, Charlotte had merely been a stranger that he had met by chance. However, the circumstances had changed the day before. He had made her a promise to teach her all the sensual delights of this world. From now on, he was going to devote all his efforts to fulfilling his promise. That was the way he lived.

Charlotte’s reaction to the cake had been excellent. She ate three slices in total, slowly savoring each bite. She said she wanted to keep the rest for later, so she’d have one slice to look forward to every day. Allen hadn’t imagined she would be so elated by something as simple as cake, so he was in an exceedingly good mood. But he couldn’t just focus on food—he had to exercise his ingenuity.

“More...more! I must let her experience all sorts of things she’s never done before!”

And so, he had been racking his brain late into the night to draw up the list in this notebook, which named every imaginable indulgence far beyond eating cakes.

“How my brilliant brain produces ingenious schemes,” he chuckled. “I’m sure they’ll have an outstanding effect on Charlotte! Let’s see what I’ve got here...”

He ran his eyes over the list:

Write a groundbreaking article on the theory of magic.

Use insanely valuable materials to make enchanted objects.

Capture fools who dare to go against me and throw them into an unyielding, living hell.

Et cetera.

“Hm... Definitely won’t please Charlotte.” These were all activities that would only delight Allen. He came to a conclusion: the midnight hype only begets garbage ideas. He tossed away the notebook and got up from his chair. One of his rare redeeming qualities was his ability to change his course of action in an instant. “Oh well. I’ll get some sleep and think it over.”

When he stepped out from the study, he bumped into Charlotte. For a moment, she looked at him with round eyes, but she quickly came to herself and bowed.

“G-Good morning. You’re up early... Are you working already?”

“No, I just fell asleep in the study.”

“Were you up all night? Y-You shouldn’t, it’s bad for your health.”

“That’s why I’m off to bed now.” Allen smiled sheepishly. If she found out he stayed up thinking about her, she’d be even more worried, so he decided to keep that to himself. “So I won’t be having breakfast today. You go ahead and eat by yourself.”

“I-I see. Should I come to wake you up when it’s lunchtime?”

“Yeah, sounds good. By the way...what’s that you’ve got there?”

He realized she was holding a broom that had been lying around in the storage room. It should have been covered in dust, since he didn’t use it very much, but she had apparently brushed it clean.

She held it close to her chest and beamed. “This? I was thinking of cleaning up the entrance hall just now. Ah, would you mind if I did?”

“Well, I don’t mind...but I didn’t ask you to do that much.” She had already finished cleaning the rooms they needed for their daily lives, including the living room and the kitchen. Only the storage room and the garden needed some work now, but there was no rush for those, so he had told her that they could take it slow. He hadn’t asked her to do anything else.

“You’re letting me stay here, after all,” she said with a bashful smile. “I thought I should find things to do without being asked.”

“You’re such a hard worker...” Though he was taken aback, he quickly looked over her and checked her health—fresh complexion, good pupils, steady breathing. He didn’t spot any signs of weakness, so she should be strong enough to clean, but it still worried him. “It’s still

early—you can take it easy, you know.”

“Yes...but it’s just a habit.”

“Did you clean every day back home?”

Charlotte laughed weakly to dodge his question. Allen couldn’t understand why her family—the house of a duke, no less—would have made her do the cleaning when they must have had servants to spare. Whatever their motive, he was sure it was ugly. This thought shook him wide awake. An intense disgust mixed with boiling rage filled the pit of his stomach, a hundred times worse than the worst hangover. His face twisted into a dark scowl.

Flustered by his expression, she gave a quick bow and blurted, “A-Anyway, good night. I’ll make sure I don’t make any noise when I clean.” She scurried off to the entrance hall.

Allen could only watch her go. When she disappeared around the corner, he stroked his chin thoughtfully. “It’s amazing that she doesn’t complain about anyone, even when they’ve been treating her like garbage.”

They had dealt with her like a servant—worse than that. What’s more, she had been forced to flee from home, hunted down under false accusations. But even now, she never spilled a word of resentment about her family or even the Prince, the ex-fiancé at the root of her troubles. If Allen were in her position, he wouldn’t rest till he’d demolished every single one of them.

“Maybe it’s not that she doesn’t resent them...maybe they’re just not people she can hold a grudge against?” He had a feeling that, even if she felt some pent-up feelings toward them, she was stopping herself from saying it out loud. There were likely multiple elements in her reticence, such as her ingrained fear of her oppressors and her low self-esteem—which, for him, was far from amusing.

He was still mulling over this with a frown when he heard voices coming from the front door. A familiar, peppy voice, followed by Charlotte’s hesitant one.

“Good mor—ooh! Who’s this?”

“Oh, uh, um...”

As if catapulted by the sound, Allen raced to the door at the speed of light. There he witnessed the worst possible scenario. “Stop right there!!!” he shouted.

“Oh, Allen,” Charlotte glanced at him with the broom still in her hand.

“Meowww?” Miach, who’d come to deliver the post, looked puzzled.



It was horrible timing for Miach to find Charlotte. He realized what a bad idea it had been to let Charlotte head to the entrance hall when he knew Miach came for the delivery every morning. He'd been so absorbed in his thoughts that he'd overlooked that fact. He stepped between them and surreptitiously hid Charlotte from Miach.

"Sorry, she's a maid I hired recently. She's shy."

"Huh. *You*, the misanthrope, hiring a maid? I always thought ya were a funny guy, Dark Lord," said Miach insouciantly.

"D-Dark Lord?!" Charlotte cried out in shock.

Allen groaned, clutching his forehead. "It's just a nickname. Though a dishonorable one."

"I think it suits ya perfectly. Hmm, hang on..." Miach squinted at Charlotte with a friendly smile. "I've got a feeling I've seen your maid somewhere before. In a recent newspaper, to be more exact."

Charlotte gasped, essentially outright confirming Miach's suspicions. With a sigh, Allen braced himself to start persuading Miach to keep it a secret. He was quite ready to bribe her. He wanted to avoid brainwashing an acquaintance if he could help it, so he hoped to sort things out peacefully. "Miach... There's a good reason for her being here—"

"Not to worry, Dark Lord." Miach grinned and proudly announced, "We at Satyrus Delivery Service put our regular patrons above everything else. It's none of our concern who happens to be a maid at our client's home."

"I owe you one."

"I dunno what you're going on about." Miach made a show of cocking her head.

Charlotte thanked her too, giving her a bow.

"Don't mention it," Miach laughed. "We don't operate in the Neils Kingdom, y'see."

Allen looked at Miach skeptically. "What would you have done if you *did* do business there?"

"Weeeell. Who can say, really?" Miach laughed it off vaguely.

Allen thanked his lucky stars that the delivery company hadn't expanded beyond their own country. Then he remembered something. "Hey, Miach. Doesn't Satyrus have a mail-order service too?"

"That's right. We mainly offer daily necessities, but if you're looking for anything in particular, we'll acquire it 'specially for you. Our handling fee is set at a modest rate. Here's our catalog."

"Sounds good. Let's see..." Allen flipped through the pamphlet, which included groceries, sundry items for daily use, and clothes.

"Excellent. Here, Charlotte." He tossed it into her hands.

"Y-Yes?" she stuttered, startled.

“I purchased most of your necessities the other day, but I don’t know what else a woman might need. You can pick what you want from there and give me a list. I’ll place an order.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll do that,” Charlotte nodded, spreading out the pamphlet in curiosity. There was a hint of a sparkle in her eyes, and she looked excited. She’d probably never had the opportunity to do much shopping before. She hugged the pamphlet close and gave a shy smile. “Thank you. I’ll, um, work hard to repay you.”

“Don’t worry about it. They’re necessary expenses, so I’ll pay.”

“What?! I-I can’t let you... You gave me those cakes yesterday too...” Charlotte still held the catalog to her chest, looking troubled.

But Allen didn’t give way. “Regardless, you can get whatever you like. If you so much as show a hint of self-restraint, I’ll buy everything in that pamphlet, so you better choose well.”

“Why are you always so extreme?!” Charlotte’s face turned pale. After the cake incident the day before, she knew he wasn’t just bluffing.

Miach chortled at their exchange. “Sounds like you’re in for a wild ride, Miss. Ya better tell ’im outright if his domineering ways get on your nerves.”

“N-No, he’s taking good care of me, so I wouldn’t dream of doing that...”

“Aww, really? But he’s so cocky. If I were you, I wouldn’t put up with his attitude—he’s just asking for my deadly cat punch.” Miach started shadowboxing on the spot, throwing punches in the air. They were rather good punches too, with some oomph. “Here’s my advice. When something stresses you out, ya take it out on that thing right back!”

“I thought I was your precious patron... Hm? Wait.” Something snagged in his head. He pondered it for a bit, then had a eureka moment. “That’s it!”

“Meow?”

“Huh?”

It was settled. He knew what naughty activity to introduce in Charlotte’s next training session.



In the early afternoon the next day, when they had just finished lunch, Miach returned with a lively greeting. “Here’s your order!”

“Good. Come in.” Allen led her to the living room. Her arms were full with a gigantic wooden box—which looked big enough to hold a human being—and a small cloth bag. The box looked heavy, but Miach carried it in effortlessly. She handed the bag to Charlotte, who was standing by.

“Here ya go—the daily goods for your order, Charlotte.”

“Oh, thank you very much.” Charlotte took it timidly. She didn’t even notice how Miach had started calling her by her first name. Apparently, Miach was really prepared to cover for her.

“And this one’s for you, Dark Lord!”

“Thanks. Let’s see...” He opened the lid to the coffin-like box and carefully inspected its contents. Out of curiosity, Charlotte tried to peek in too, but before she could see anything, he closed the lid. Of course, gifts should always be kept as a surprise till the very moment of presenting them. “Hm. It’s a fine quality product. Here’s your payment for this delivery.”

“All righty then, let me just confirm it. One, two, three... Oh?” Miach paused while counting the silver coins. “It’s a lot more than the fee. Hang on a minute, I’ll just fetch out the change—”

“No need. Take it, it’s a tip.”

“Meow! You’re feeling generous! Thankee kindly, Dark Lord!” She smiled from ear to ear and pocketed the coins.

The tip also doubled as a kind of hush money. If Allen could protect Charlotte this way, it was a small price to pay. While he was putting away his wallet, Miach was staring at the wooden box.

“By the way,” she asked, “what are you going to do with a thing like that?”

“Use it, of course.”

“Seriously? You’ve got to be kidding, Dark Lord. Ya look so...indoorsy.” Miach wasn’t one to hold back.

Allen gave a pat on Charlotte’s shoulder. “No, not me. It’s for Charlotte.”

“M-Me?” She clearly hadn’t expected the conversation to turn her way.

“Huh. You’re more active than you look, Charlotte,” said Miach.

“Wh-What in the world did you buy?”

Allen let out a diabolical snicker. “Time for the big reveal...” With a triumphant grin, he snapped his fingers. The box fell away at once. In the middle of the fragments of wood, there hung a large object.

“A punching bag?” Charlotte murmured in bewilderment.

“Precisely!” Allen declared. It was a classic punching bag, hanging from a metal pole, normally used for boxing training and workouts. “I really can count on Satyrus to deliver anything. Thanks for your work, as always.”

“Why, of course! Thank *you* for your patronage. I’ll be making your deliveries the top priority!”

“Uh, um...one moment,” Charlotte cut in on their chitchat. She looked completely flummoxed. She looked from Allen to the punching bag, back and forth, and tilted her head. “Wh-Why would I use this?”

Oh, could it be for exercise...perhaps?"

"Close, but not quite," Allen proclaimed with a thwack on the bag. "This is your naughty lesson for today!"

"N-Naughty lesson..." Charlotte gulped.

Miach shot him a slightly cringy look. "Huh? What's that, some kinda kinky play?"

"No. It's a long story..."

After Allen gave her a brief summary of everything, Miach shook her head with a frown. "Ya know, Dark Lord, ya couldn't have chosen a worse name for these lessons... But why is it naughty to use a punching bag?"

"Well, it might look like a normal exercise, but today..." He took out some newspaper clippings from his breast pocket and stuck them onto the bag, putting the final pieces of his plan in place. "It's time for stress relief! You're going to pummel these guys as hard as you can!!!"

"What?!" Charlotte squeaked. She stared at the photographs that Allen had attached to the bag, which showed a stern-featured man in the prime of life, and a young man with cold eyes. She murmured in a trembling voice, "Th-That's my father and..."

"Uh-huh. Your ex-fiancé," Allen nodded calmly. For some reason, he had to emphasize the "ex" part—he didn't know why. "What you need to do is refuse to accept everything that's thrown at you. Instead, you have to get angry."

"Get...angry?"

"Exactly." He gently took her hands and put on the boxing gloves he'd ordered for her. He had chosen the bloodred pair, driven by his personal enmity toward her enemies, but he didn't go into that. "Endurance is important sometimes, but it's also vital to unleash your desires when necessary. If you don't, you'll surely break down at some point."

Repressed emotions never went away. They lay dormant and festered deep inside the heart, and eventually flooded over to sabotage the self. He didn't want Charlotte to suffer anything like that.

"It's natural to feel uncertain at first. But you'll get addicted to it in no time."

"Ya sound like a baddie, Dark Lord," Miach muttered, shaking her head.

Charlotte was still pale. She trembled, her eyes fixed on the portraits of the Prince and the Duke. "B-But...I'm...I'm not angry."

"Even when they've scorned you and ruined your life like that?" Allen had scoured numerous newspapers to find these photographs. In the process, he'd realized just how much everyone in the Kingdom of Neils believed Charlotte was a "wicked woman." To top it off, there was a bounty on her head. The soldiers he had driven away had also

said they were to capture her “dead or alive.” She no longer had a home to return to. In other words, they had dashed her whole life to the ground and trampled on her dignity. Yet she didn’t utter a single word of anger. She merely smiled in resignation.

“The Prince and my father...I’m sure they had a reason to do what they did.”

“You mean it’s okay to throw you away like a dirty rag as long as they have some kind of reason?”

“There’s nothing I can do...” Charlotte shook her head meekly. “I’m indebted to my father for raising me and providing for me until now. As for the Prince...he had to put up with being engaged to someone like me, so I feel sorry for giving him trouble. I can’t possibly resent them.”

Allen was speechless. Apparently, the root of the problem lay even deeper than he’d imagined. The punching bag was only a small part of the plan he had devised, the rough outline of which went as follows:

Make Charlotte notice her internalized grudge.

Rush to the neighboring Kingdom and expose the Prince’s wrongdoing.

Prove Charlotte’s innocence and have the villains arrested.

All’s well that ends well—celebrate the happy ending!

However, he was now forced to discard his blueprint for the future. With this plan alone, there was no hope of healing Charlotte’s wounded soul. First of all, she couldn’t come to terms with what was in her heart. She had grown too accustomed to repressing her emotions, terrified of expressing her true feelings. Either that, or she had completely given up the ability to feel. She’d numbed her heart, since that had been the only way she could survive until now. The hard shell she had built up to protect herself was suffocating her. If she cleared her name and the Prince was punished for his crimes, it was likely she wouldn’t rejoice at the news—on the contrary, she would be distressed, blaming herself for bringing misfortune on someone.

“Dark Lord,” Miach murmured, tugging at Allen’s sleeve, “I certainly don’t mean to pry into my patron’s personal life, but still, I can’t help but say it...” She lowered her voice with a hesitant glance at Charlotte. “P’haps...it might be best to let her be for a little bit longer.”

“Well, I agree with you for the most part.”

“For the most part?”

Allen saw that the scars in Charlotte’s heart were too deep. She needed time to heal. But it went against his nature to do nothing and idly wait for time to pass. He drew closer to Charlotte, who had been standing there with downcast eyes, and called her name.

“Y-Yes?”

He took her gloved hands in his and said, “If you don’t want to hit the bag...then punch me.”

“E-Excuse me?”

“*Huh?*”

This time, Charlotte and Miach both froze in shock. Allen cocked his head in the sudden hush. “Hm, didn’t you hear me? I told you to punch me.”

“Never thought you’d have such a fetish, Dark Lord...”

“Don’t get me wrong. This is part of the naughty training.” Allen shrugged at Miach, who was casting him a frosty look. Then, turning to Charlotte, he spread out his arms. “Look, I’m your punching bag. Give me all you’ve got.”

“Um...why in the world would I do that?!” she exclaimed, the color draining from her face. Well, he expected as much. She pressed her gloved hands against her chest and shook her head sharply. “I can never hit you! You’ve been so kind to me, Allen... I just can’t!”

“It’s not a matter of can or can’t,” Allen smiled warmly. He gestured to her to come closer with his index finger. “You just do it.”

“*Huh?!?*” In an instant, Charlotte’s right arm sprang up. She leaned back and swung wide to land a perfect corkscrew punch on Allen’s cheek, throwing him off his feet for about three meters. “Allen?!”

Specks of dust fell from the ceiling over the newly cleaned living room. She rushed forward to where he lay groaning on the floor. “Wh-What was that?! The gloves...just moved on their own!”

“Hmph. That was magic. I cast a spell on your right arm and made you punch me... Well done.”

“What am I witnessing right now?” Miach squinted at him as though he was some pervert, but he was too focused on Charlotte to care.

He checked his own injury—slight cuts on his lips and inside his mouth, but his teeth and bones were fine. He wiped away the blood seeping out on the corner of his mouth and grinned at Charlotte, who watched him with a panic-stricken face.

“Listen, Charlotte. I want you to know one thing.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Whether I’m punched, kicked, or cursed at...no matter what happens, I’m never going to abandon you.”

Charlotte was lost for words.

“Hmm?” Miach stared at him, a little round-eyed.

This was all Allen wanted to tell Charlotte—that he was on her side. Nothing would ever change that, and he was certain of it. He knew he’d only met her several days ago, and this confession was going over the top. But he couldn’t help himself.

“This isn’t the Evans estate. You can let yourself feel anything, and say anything you want. You’re free.”

“Free...” Stunned, Charlotte echoed the word as though she’d never heard it before. But she returned to herself in a moment and burst out, “Did you...make me hit you just to say that?!”

“Obviously. You wouldn’t change if I didn’t take extreme measures. It’s shock therapy.”

Charlotte fumed, her face turning bright red. “You’re risking yourself too much!”

It was the first time he’d seen her like this. *So she can get angry after all.* He felt slightly relieved, but he didn’t say it out loud. He knew that would just be fanning the flames, and more than anything, she was a little frightening.

He shrank back and tried to mollify her. “B-But you know, I can easily heal cuts on this level. See?” He cast a simple healing spell on himself. The swelling in his cheek and the taste of blood in his mouth disappeared as if nothing had happened. “All better. There’s nothing we can’t put right again. So I want you to do all kinds of things, and feel things, without being scared.”

“Allen...” Charlotte was tongue-tied for a moment, but she slipped back to her angry face again. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you were hurt just now.”

“Uh...well, can’t deny that.”

“Please don’t do anything like this in the future. You’ll give me a heart attack. Do you promise?”

“Oh, all right...” he could only nod timidly. Daredevil though he was, he felt the force of her genuine fury with some trepidation.

Then her face softened a little. “For all my life, I’ve been scared of so many things,” she said, a distant look in her eyes. “But...I don’t have to live like that anymore, do I?”

“Of course not.” He held her hand gently. Even through the gloves, he could sense how nervous she was.

She gazed back at him with a look of determination. “It might take some time...but I’ll do my best. I want to be able to say what I think.”

“Good. There’s no rush. I don’t care how long it takes—I’ll be here,” Allen grinned.

The lesson had veered quite a bit off course from his original goal of stress relief, but for a first step, it wasn’t so bad.

Charlotte is starting over here and now, he thought. *I’ll be patient and watch over her.*

The punching bag, rendered pointless for the present, caught his eye. “Sorry, Miach,” he said ruefully. “You lugged it all the way here...but it looks like it’ll be some time till we make use of it.”

“Oh no, no problem at all,” Miach shook her head. For some reason, she had a positively radiant smile plastered across her face. Peering at Allen’s face, she purred, “More importantly, I hope I can look forward to your continued patronage with Satyrus Delivery Service.”

“Hm? Of course. Why do you say that?”

“Well, I’m guessing you’ll be placing many more orders soon! A double bed, a ring...maybe even baby essentials, before long! Ooh, so many things to deliver, I can’t wait!”

“Why would we need things like that?” Allen asked, looking to Charlotte.

“I have no idea...”

In contrast to Miach, who was getting hyped up all by herself, Allen and Charlotte exchanged glances in bewilderment.

Chapter 4: A Naughty Battle between Brother and Sister

One balmy day, an ominous figure stood in the forest, surveying Allen's mansion from afar, feet planted firmly on the ground.
"So...that's it."

The figure glared at the mansion for a while, but eventually took a step toward it with an air of determination. Their eyes glinted threateningly in the shadows of the woods, but of course, there was no one else in the vicinity to take notice.



Around the same time, inside the mansion, Allen and Charlotte were having lunch.

"All right, Charlotte! Pop quiz!" Allen said out of the blue.

"Y-Yes?" Charlotte, holding a sandwich, looked back at him with round eyes.

Allen had whipped up some sandwiches, since it was a simple meal that looked nice just by putting together sliced bread and ingredients. He'd never paid much attention to what he ate before Charlotte came, but now, he put a little more thought into each meal, not only for the nutritional value, but also for how appetizing it looked.

He was holding a pot in each hand, one for coffee, the other for black tea. "Coffee or tea—which one would you like?"

"Umm, I'll have whatever you're having..."

"I'm going to have a specially brewed, uber-nutritious, so-bad-it-makes-you-puke potion. Are you sure you want the same thing?"

She mulled it over and answered, "Tea, please."

Satisfied, Allen started preparing the tea. "You promised yesterday that you're going to try to be honest. The first step is to become aware of what you like."

"It was only a choice between coffee and tea. It's not that important."

"But you couldn't speak your mind even for small matters like that until now, right?"

"Well...that's true." She nibbled at the sandwich, then said with a troubled smile, "You're right. I don't remember making a single

decision for myself in the past few years...except for when I decided to run away from home.”

“So this was your first decision since the escape! Grave matters you’re dealing with,” he chuckled. “Hope you’ll find a hobby too, in time. If there’s anything you want to try, just tell me.”

“Hmm...something to try...” She fell into deep thought, a corner of the sandwich still in her mouth.

Allen had no idea what she was seeing in her mind’s eye, so he let her be. But he had a hunch that, at this rate, in the not-so-distant future, a day might come when he would pull out the punching bag that he’d stowed away in the storage room.

Both of them were silent for a little while. The only sounds they could hear were the simmering of the hot water and the birdsong echoing from the forest outside. These blended together in a gentle harmony, and time seemed to slow down in the tranquil air, when—

“At last! I found you!” Someone banged open the door with a shout.

Charlotte gasped and jumped up in her chair. Allen scowled and grumbled, “Bleh.”

The intruder who marched in was a young woman about the same age as Charlotte. She was short, but had a shapely figure, with attractive curves in all the right places. Her big, black eyes were full of fiery vigor, and there were colorful highlights in her black, shoulder-length hair. She was clad in a robe similar to Allen’s, but with points on the hood that looked like cat ears, and underneath she wore a very revealing top and a super short mini skirt. She looked more like an edgy artist than a witch.

Allen could only sigh at the familiar face. “Why now? I’m too busy for this.” He sprinkled some tea leaves into the pot and poured in hot water for three people to account for the unexpected guest. “Just tell me, for future reference—how did you find this place?”

“Easy. I narrowed down the region from a bit of pollen that was stuck to your letter, then I went around all the towns asking if anyone knew of an eccentric wizard.”

“Tch...a combination of precise knowledge and excessive energy.” Allen swore to himself to do better next time as he served tea for everyone.

“Uh, umm...who is this, Allen?” Charlotte asked timidly, her eyes still big.

“That’s what *I’d* like to ask,” said the intruder. “But fine. I’ll introduce myself. My name is Eluka Crawford! Allen’s younger sister!”



“His sister?! ”

“Yeah, yeah. Foster sister,” Allen muttered, adding spoon after spoon of sugar into his own teacup. “And? What do you want? Don’t tell me Uncle’s still trying to drag me back home.”

“Of course not. Papa gave up on that a long time ago.” Eluka rolled her eyes and took her cup. She downed it in one go without sitting down. “He decided that a lone wolf like you couldn’t possibly hold down a post at the school of magic.” She shrugged casually at the assessment. “It’s far more productive to let you wander around wherever you want while publishing your research findings.”

“Oh good, so he finally got it.”

Eluka glowered at him. “He’s way too soft, that’s what I say.”

Charlotte meekly tugged at Allen’s sleeve. “You call him ‘Uncle,’ but your sister calls him ‘Papa?’”

“Uh-huh. Like I said, she’s my foster sister. We’re not actually related by blood,” he explained, thrusting his chin at Eluka. Naturally, she and he didn’t look alike. The only similarity was the color of their hair, but Eluka’s was completely black, while Allen’s was half black, half white. “My parents died when I was little. I was adopted by my distant relations, the Crawford family. Eluka is my foster father’s daughter. She’s seventeen, same as you.”

“I-I see... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry into your family history.”

“What do I care? There’s nothing to hide, anyway.”

“Uh, hello? Aren’t *you* hiding something from me?” Eluka stared at Charlotte with a stony expression. “Who’s this? Your *girlfriend*?”

“Girl—!” Charlotte went bright red to the tips of her ears. She looked back and forth between Allen and Eluka in a panic. “N-No! But, um, well...if that’s what I look like, I’m hap—”

“Of course not, Eluka. Don’t be rude.”

“Ah...” For some reason, Charlotte froze in shock.

Allen gave her shoulder a pat and said, “I’m sure it would nauseate Charlotte to be mistaken as a romantic partner for such a personality-disaster social misfit who’s also an abominable, genius wizard. I must deny your accusation emphatically in the interests of her honor.”

“But I’ve never thought anything like that!” Charlotte protested.

“Sometimes your self-assessment is too accurate, bro.” Eluka stroked her chin thoughtfully and peered at Charlotte. “So if she’s not your girlfriend, who is she? Why is she putting up with you? Is she a volunteer? Traveling salesperson? Some kind of religious recruiter?”

“W-Well, ummm...”

“This is Charlotte Evans,” he cut in. “She’s a wanted person who fled from the neighboring country.”

"Oh, Allen!"

"Huh?" Eluca cocked her head, unable to process the situation.

Allen gave her a rough summary of everything that had happened: how Charlotte had been persecuted for crimes she had never committed, how Allen had taken her in when he'd found her collapsed outside the mansion, and how he was in the midst of teaching her all kinds of "naughty things."

Charlotte listened, her face growing pale. When he finished, she whispered in his ear, "I-Is it safe to tell her everything?"

"Even if we hide it from her now, she'll dig up the truth herself. We might as well be honest from the start."

"B-But she's your sister... Maybe she'll get worried about you..." Charlotte glanced at Eluca anxiously.

After a few moments, Eluca heaved an immense sigh and pressed her palm against her forehead. "I always knew you were an idiot, bro, but I was wrong. You're a hopeless, insufferable idiot."

"Hm. Why so?"

"Isn't it obvious?!" Eluca exclaimed, jabbing her finger at Allen. "You've been giving her food, and making her punch you... Why don't you teach her the kind of naughty things that would actually make a *girl* happy?!"

"Is *that* really the problem here?!" Charlotte cried out.

But Eluca was unstoppable. She grabbed Charlotte's hands and gave them a big squeeze. "You must've suffered so much!" she said, tears brimming in her eyes. "You were so strong. If there's anything I can do, just tell me! I'll do everything I can to help!"

"Th-Thank you so much?" Bewildered, Charlotte nodded, then timidly asked, "Um...why do you believe me?"

"Huh? Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, um, it's odd for me to say it...but I'm rather suspicious, aren't I?"

"But bro believes in you, right?" Eluca tilted her head and flashed her a bright smile. "Then it's all right. As you can see, he's a *total* weirdo, but when it comes to sniffing out villains, his sense of smell is as sharp as a dog's."

Allen glared at Eluca. "If you're going to praise me, do it straight." He hadn't seen her in about a year, but as always, she was as aggressive to him as she was charitable. In a way, he felt relieved to see she hadn't changed much. "So? What are you doing here?"

"To be honest, I came to bring you back, but..." Eluca paused and squeezed Charlotte in a tight hug. "Never mind about that! I wanna mollycoddle Charlotte too! I'm gonna teach her some naughty fun!"

"Uh...do you intend to stay here?" Allen frowned.

"Why not? I'm also here to investigate this region, anyway."

"To investigate?" Charlotte asked.

"Yup. Believe it or not, I'm an apprentice engineer of enchanted objects," Eluka said, smiling. "The magical materials type."

"M-Magical materials?"

"Basically, I work with enchanted objects made from the bones or skins of magical beasts. So I fly around the world collecting materials."

There were many kinds of enchanted objects. Some of them were normal objects with spells cast over them, others incorporated magical materials to strengthen their power, still others were generated by nature, and so on. Eluka gave her a rundown, but Charlotte only blinked in surprise. Apparently, she was totally clueless about anything to do with magic.

"Were you never taught about magic at all?" Allen wondered.

"I-I only knew that it was something useful... I'm sorry for my ignorance," she said, downcast. Since all her time had been taken up by chores and learning to become a good wife, she probably had no opportunity to learn about magic.

"That makes it all the more fun for us to teach you!" Eluka smiled to cheer her up. "I bet you're itching to give her lessons about magic, huh, bro? Old habits die hard."

"Old habits?" Charlotte asked.

"Ugh, enough about me." Allen waved off the question with a sigh and scowled at Eluka. "Fine, I'll let you stay. But *you*, teaching Charlotte naughty things? Hah! Give me a break."

"Mrrr, what are you getting at?" Eluka made a face.

Allen sneered triumphantly, put his hand on Charlotte's shoulder, and declared, "Only *I* can teach her naughty things in the best way possible! There's no space for *you* to butt in, you've only just met her!"

"What did you say?!"

"Oh dear," Charlotte glanced wide-eyed from one to the other. Eluka was fuming. The siblings confronted each other face-to-face.

"There are certain pleasures that only a woman can teach another woman! I swear, I'm gonna make Charlotte melt with my naughty technique!"

"Don't make me laugh! I've been thinking about naughty things to teach Charlotte twenty-four seven! You, outdo me? Fat chance!"

"What kind of conversation is this?" Charlotte could only look on in a fluster, but the siblings weren't finished.

They both knew that quarreling like this would get nowhere, so Eluka threw down the gauntlet. "Why don't we fight it out then?"

"Hmph, takes me back to the old days. I'm down." They each stuck out their fists and knocked against the other's. "We'll see who's better at teaching Charlotte naughty things... Let the duel begin!"

“Bring it on!”

“Ummm...” Charlotte murmured helplessly.



And so, the three of them went out to the city, not far from Allen’s mansion. Since there were several convenient dungeons nearby, it got a fair amount of traffic. Miach’s delivery company was also located in this city. Now, just after lunchtime, the streets were swarmed with people.

Charlotte was cowering in the shadow of a building, holding a piece of cloth over her head. She looked rather suspicious. “What are we doing here?!” she squeaked.

“What, is there a problem?” Allen asked.

Eluka shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, we have to fight it out and see which of us can make you the happiest. There’s not much we can do if we just hang around in that gloomy mansion.”

“And it’s a good chance for me to stock up on groceries and things. Fresh air will do you good once in a while, Charlotte.”

“But, um...I’m a wanted person!” Charlotte peeped furtively around her. Unfortunately, the city’s notice boards were plastered with wanted posters, and the newest addition to them was none other than Charlotte’s. “If I walk around in the open, I’ll surely get caught... I-I wouldn’t want that... It’ll bring trouble on you and Eluka...” she sniffled.

“Still worrying about other people? Typical.” Allen smiled sadly. He offered her a handkerchief and said, in the gentlest voice he could muster, “It’s all right. There’s no need to worry. Trust me.” He put his hand softly on her hair and, with his other hand, snapped his fingers. “*Shape Shift.*”

“Oh!” A pale light enwreathed her hair, then disappeared in an instant. When he handed her a small mirror, she stared at her reflection in surprise. “M-My hair... It’s black!” Charlotte’s beautiful, golden locks had indeed turned as pitch-black as the darkest night. She peered at her own face curiously.

“Indeed. It’s a simple disguise spell,” Allen said. “And with a different hairstyle, you wouldn’t be recognized so easily. We’ll look out for you, so don’t worry.”

“Th-Thank you so much.”

“Heh heh, leave the styling to me!” Eluka pounced on Charlotte and started playing with her hair. “Ooh, it looks so good on you! You match with my black hair now!”

“Y-Yes. And with Allen’s too...half of it,” Charlotte smiled shyly.

“Sure,” Allen shrugged. He inspected her black hair, patting himself on the back for the skillful transformation—her hair looked

glossy and healthy, without any split ends. "But I'm going to undo the spell as soon as we get home."

"Oh... I see..."

"What?! Why? Black hair is just as nice!" Eluka booed. Charlotte looked a little crestfallen as well.

Allen, however, was adamant. "Black isn't too bad, but still, blonde suits Charlotte best. I like her that way most of all."

At this, for some reason, Charlotte grew perfectly still, at a loss for words. Eluka clammed up in astonishment too.

"Hm? Did I say something odd?" Allen cocked his head.

"N-No... It's nothing..." Charlotte looked down, a deep blush spreading over her face.

"No fair, bro. Racking up points already?" Eluka threw him a judgy look, then deftly did up Charlotte's hair. She took Charlotte's hands and gave her a warm smile. "All done! I can't let bro score all the points. I'm gonna go all out and teach you something naughty that only a woman can show you!"

"Wh-What's that?"

"Heh heh heh, the most obvious thing..." Eluka smirked and pointed at the main street in front of them, lined with shops that looked exactly like the kind that young women would enjoy. "Fashion, of course! I'll pick out lots of outfits and accessories for you! Come on, let's go!" Eluka dashed off, pulling Charlotte by her hand.

"Oh! Please, slow down!"

"Hey, careful not to trip," Allen called after them and followed, already exhausted.



Allen visited this city about once every five days, mainly to get groceries and daily essentials, check on the enchanted object shops, browse bookstores, and so on. As far as he was concerned, there was not much more to the city. He had never even dreamed of setting foot in a store like the one he found himself in now.

"Look, look, Charlotte! You'll look gorgeous in this one too!"

"Oh, um, uh..." Charlotte seemed flummoxed, but Eluka handed her one item after another.

Allen was observing them from several meters away, trying to make himself invisible as much as possible. *I knew it before I went in, but I feel so out of place...*

He looked all around the store, but he was the only male customer. The rest of the clientele were peppy young girls, squeeing at each other. The shop's interior was the embodiment of "fancy." The spacious room was packed with women's clothes, with shoes and accessories displayed on the shelves. Apparently, it was one of the

hottest boutiques in town, and the atmosphere was particularly gleeful. To Allen, who was undoubtedly the gloomy type—both in the eyes of others and his own—it was a completely alien world.

A young female shop attendant came to greet him, much to his consternation. “Hello, there. Are you here with someone?”

“D-Don’t mind me...” He wished he could disappear, but that wasn’t an option. He had to battle it out with Eluka to determine who could make Charlotte happier. It was a duel that had no clear criteria or method of evaluation, but both siblings were going for the win at full throttle. *Come to think of it, we haven’t changed much from when we were kids...*

Allen was nine years old when he was adopted by the Crawford family. Eluka had been five then, but the age difference didn’t deter her from chasing her new brother around and challenging him to all kinds of battles—races, chess games, magic duels, and so on. Of course, Allen beat her hands down every time, but Eluka never gave up. Maybe those duels had been her way of breaking the ice. He felt a little sorry for having been so childish and defeating her completely in every game.

“Hey, bro!”

“Hm?” When he looked up, he saw Eluka glaring back at him.

“Snap out of it, will you? Come on, look at Charlotte’s transformation. What do you think?”

“Oh...?”

“Umm...” Charlotte fidgeted demurely.

While he was lost in thought, Charlotte had changed into an outfit from the store. She was dressed in a white, frilly blouse and a light, wavy skirt with a floral pattern. A thin scarf was wrapped around her neck, giving an airy impression. These clothes were much less aristocratic compared to the dress she had been in when they had first met, both in material and design. Yet this outfit, simple and fresh, suited her much better. However, Allen noticed one big problem. “Isn’t that skirt...too short?”

“Huh? This is normal. Besides, it’s cute,” Eluka said nonchalantly, but it *was* an extremely short mini skirt.

The fair skin of Charlotte’s thighs was exposed, and Allen couldn’t help but stare. Since Allen had been serving her well-balanced meals and sweets, her thighs looked healthy, plump, and silky smooth. Allen couldn’t come up with anything more to say, and he stood rooted to the spot. But Eluka was delighted, jumping onto Charlotte and rubbing her cheeks against hers.

“Look at *you*, you’re sooo adorable! You have a great figure too. I knew you’d look amazing in this outfit! You look super cute!”

“B-But...I’m too shy to wear this...” She squirmed, pulling at the

hem of her skirt with an anxious look. She was blushing right up to her ears. It was probably her first time wearing a skirt as short as this one. Her thighs, pressed together, also had a faint tinge of pink.

“Hrng!” Allen let out a muffled groan and collapsed.

“Oh?! Allen!” Charlotte rushed over to him. “A-Are you okay?! Are you feeling ill?”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing,” Allen smiled weakly, turning his pallid face to her. “I needed to calm myself, so I just tried stopping my heart for a second.”

“That’s not ‘nothing’!” Charlotte cried out in shock.

“Still the same bro. You do reckless things as thoughtlessly as breathing,” Eluka shook her head with a sigh. “Come on, Charlotte, let’s ignore this idiot. Wanna try on this one next?”

“B-But his heart stopped! Shouldn’t we go see a doctor?!”

“It was only a second or two, right? No worries. Here, go on.” Eluka pushed a big pile of clothes into Charlotte’s arms and gently pushed her into the changing room. Allen was amazed by Eluka’s sheer, unstoppable efficiency.

And so, the Crawford siblings were left by themselves outside the changing room.

“So...” Eluka shot a sideways glance at Allen. “Anything I can do?”

Allen slowly got to his feet and stroked his chin. “I want to know the current situation in Neils Kingdom, for a start.” Only a thin curtain separated them from Charlotte, so he kept his voice low to make sure she wouldn’t hear him. He calmly continued, “I managed to drive away her pursuers once. Just from reading the papers, I can’t tell whether they gave up on the chase after that, or they’re still up in arms in search of her.”

News from Neils Kingdom had been everywhere in the papers for a while, but these days, there was hardly anything. Sensational as the incident was, there was probably nothing more to be said without further reports on the fugitive. Allen wanted to gather more information about what was happening on the other side of the border, but he’d avoided hiring an informant so as to not arouse any suspicion.

“Can you investigate for me?”

“I’ll handle it. There’s bound to be someone Papa knows in Neils Kingdom too. I’ll try casually asking around,” Eluka winked at him. “Want me to look into that Prince and her family, while I’m at it?”

“Well...that’s probably not necessary at the moment.”

“Why so laissez-faire? It’s important to have the information, all the same.”

“Once I hear the facts...I won’t be able to unlearn them,” Allen murmured with a slight sigh. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t want to

know—what kind of person had betrayed her, and how had she been treated all her life? But if he found out about all of that, there would be no turning back. “I won’t be able to ignore it. I’m sure I’ll go over there and attack them, without even listening to what Charlotte wants. So you don’t have to look into that for the time being.”

“Hunh.” Eluka smirked at him.

“What’s that face supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking about how people change,” she snickered, poking him in the ribs. “I’ve never seen you care about any one person before. It’s a good thing.”

“You think?” He cocked his head. It was true, this was almost the first time in his life he’d been so concerned about someone outside his immediate family. But still, he didn’t understand how that was a “good thing.”

“All right then, I’ll just dig into the state of the country. In return —”

“I’m not going back home, just so you know.”

“Didn’t expect you would,” Eluka scoffed, then glanced at the changing room. “Well, I’ll be patient and let you stay here for a while. There’s Charlotte to take care of, after all. Instead, I want you to help me out with making enchanted objects.”

“Deal. If that’s all you want, it’s a good bargain.”

“Yesss! With your help, it’ll be like having a hundred extra assistants, you know.” Eluka beamed as she slapped his back. She was a competent, perceptive sister. He was honestly glad that she hadn’t grown up to be a gloomy emo like himself.

“Umm...” Charlotte’s voice came from behind the curtain.

Did she hear us?! Allen panicked. They hadn’t said anything they had to hide from her, but he was sure that the topic would make her sad. He didn’t want to see her face like that ever again. He didn’t know what to say, but Eluka answered as if nothing had happened. “What’s up, Charlotte?”

“I’m sorry... I’m having trouble with the hook at the back...”

“Oh, of course! I’ll help.” Eluka went right in without hesitation. Allen quickly turned away. He caught a fleeting glimpse of her skin through a gap, but he cast a brainwashing spell on himself to wipe away the memory. For a while, he stood there listening to the sounds of rustling and squealing that went on behind the curtain.

“Is it the hook at the back of your neck? Could you turn around and show me?” Eluka asked.

“L-Like this?”

“Hmm... Yeah, no wonder this was hard to put on by yourself.”

There was nothing unusual about their conversation, but Allen frowned slightly. *Did Eluka’s voice darken a little just now?* She sounded

like she had noticed something, or caught her breath. But it had been a very subtle shift in her tone. She'd managed to keep talking without alarming Charlotte. Allen wondered what it could have been.

Just then, the curtain was swept aside. Charlotte emerged in another outfit, and Eluka stood beaming proudly next to her. "Look, bro. Doesn't she look super cute in this one too?"

"Again, isn't it rather revealing?"

The first outfit was a mini skirt, now it was hot pants. He sensed the same sinful desires threatening to well up in him again, so he shifted his gaze upward. He let out a sigh of relief to see the relatively modest top.

"You're too uptight, bro." Eluka rolled her eyes in an exaggerated gesture. "Girls gotta be on the offensive, or we don't stand a chance."

"What are they fighting for, though?" he muttered. If it was up to him, he'd want Charlotte to cover up more and build a defensive fortress around herself. "By the way, did anything happen in there?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?" Eluka feigned ignorance. Allen could see right through her act, but for some reason, he hesitated to press her further on the spot. He felt a growing sense of unease. "Anyway, look at Charlotte properly. This outfit's got an amazing design at the back."

"At the back?"

"Oh yes! It's super bold," Eluka winked mischievously. She put her hand on Charlotte's shoulder as if to guide her. "Go on, Charlotte. Twirl around here and show him."

"Uhh...but I'm too shy..."

"No excuses! Rah!" Eluka spun her around, and Charlotte squealed. Allen was speechless. "So, what do you think?! It looks normal from the front, but it's wide open at the back! Isn't it bold and so on point?!"

"Umm...I need more fabric..." Charlotte looked down in embarrassment, but she noticed something in Allen's face. "Oh, A-Allen. Is anything wrong?"

"Ah, nothing. Don't worry," Allen forced himself to smile. He stepped into the changing room and stood next to her. He made her turn around toward the mirror. She looked anxious, but he smiled at her through the mirror and said, "It's a little too revealing...but it looks good on you."

"R-Really?"

"Yes. Be confident." Allen placed his hand on her shoulder and grinned. Then he furtively lowered his eyes so she wouldn't notice. Most of her back was bare, exposed to the air, and her skin was blushing faintly now. But what had caught his eye were the countless bruises all across her back.

Judging from the shape, they could be from whipping. It was probably the type of whip that could be used simply for causing pain and instilling fear, rather than inflicting severe injuries as punishment. It wasn't strong enough to break the skin or bones, but it would have made a loud noise and left lingering pain. The marks had been made relentlessly over numerous occasions, just low enough on her back to be covered under a dress. The coils of red, purple, and black were like a venomous snake winding around her body and gnawing away at her soul. Since they were all on her back, Charlotte probably didn't suspect that she had such marks. So Allen repressed the magma boiling up from the pit of his stomach, and curled his lips.

"It does suit you well, but... *Healing.*"

"Ohh?"

A gentle light encircled Charlotte. He had transformed her hair earlier that day; now it was time for a full body treatment. The light vanished in a moment, leaving Charlotte looking startled in its wake. Allen softly caressed her back. The gruesome marks were completely gone. Not even a trace was left on her pale skin. Of course, there was no way Allen would leave anything behind. She looked at him quizzically, and he flashed her a mischievous grin. "You had some traces of pimples on your back. I made them disappear."

"Eep! I-I'm embarrassed..."

"What for? It's a sign that you're healthy. I gave you a full body treatment with the same spell. Even any hangnails you might've had should be healed now."

"Way to go, bro! A personal esthetician!" Eluka smacked his back over-emphatically. With their performance, they managed to keep their discovery a secret.

Come to think of it...she did say she was always scolded for getting things wrong. At first, Allen hadn't been able to figure out what that really meant. He had to admit his own failure to notice her wounds before. When he had first rescued her, he had asked her if she was hurting anywhere, checked her limbs for scrapes, noted her malnutrition, and administered the appropriate treatment. There was no lie in her words then—of course, pain inflicted by that kind of whip would have been gone the next day. Only the bruises would have remained, like a curse.

He bitterly regretted his own thoughtlessness for not inspecting the rest of her skin out of awkwardness. But how could he have known? *Even for a bastard child, wasn't she a vital piece in the Duke's power game? She was even engaged to the Prince, after all. Why would they go out of their way to wound her?!*

He could understand how they could have spurned her and treated her coldly because of her birth. But when he saw those bruises,

he couldn't help but sense an animosity that far surpassed such disdain. He couldn't imagine anyone harboring such hatred for Charlotte. What's more, those bruises could have been easily healed with a simple magic spell. In other words, Charlotte's family hadn't allowed her to receive even the most basic medical treatments. But still, those marks were more than enough to conjecture how she had lived at home.

Allen felt a shiver run up his spine. He betrayed none of those feelings to Charlotte, however. The only person who noticed was Eluka, who stood smiling next to them.

"I see how it was..." Allen muttered to himself. "Hey, Eluka."

"What's up?" Eluka turned to him with an innocent grin.

"Going back to our earlier conversation," he said nonchalantly, "I have a mind to exterminate every single one of them after all. Would you help me?"

"Of course. You can count on me!" Eluka beamed, giving him a thumbs up.

Charlotte had no idea what they were talking about.

"Exterminate? What do you mean?"

"Ah, apparently the books I'd left behind at home got infested with bugs. I was asking Eluka to let them dry out in the sun," Allen replied.

"Oh, b-bugs... I'm a bit uneasy around them too," she said, turning slightly pale.

"What a coincidence, me too. I hate them so much they make me sick," he replied, grinning. Behind the veneer of his smile, he strengthened his resolve. All Charlotte had to be scared of were bugs, ghosts, and things of that nature. He was determined to eradicate anything else that posed a threat to her. Though he kept his resolution to himself for the time being, Eluka could sense it. She stroked Charlotte's back, now all healed, and smiled.

"Come on, come on, enough chitchat! Our fashion show's only getting started! Next up, try this one, and this one, and this!"

"Wait... Isn't that just a bunch of strings?" Allen cut in.

"I'm not sure that counts as a piece of clothing!" Charlotte protested.

"Don't worry! It'll cover the crucial bits just fine," she said casually, shoving the clothes—or strings—into Charlotte's hands.

Evidently, there was a threat to Charlotte more imminent than he'd expected. Allen pushed aside the strings and declared, "As her guardian, I refuse to allow any more exposure! From now on, I'll screen all the clothes you bring for her!"

"Boooo! All bark and no bite! If you're so bothered, I dare you to go find clothes that'll suit her yourself!"

“Fine! I’ll make you bow down to my impeccable sense of style!!!”

“Uh, um, oh dear...”

In spite of Charlotte’s fluster, the Crawford siblings’ ruthless battle raged on with an ever more fierce intensity.

Chapter 5: Naughty Chaos in the City

Two hours later, the trio was enjoying a pleasant teatime in a chic café. The terrace looking out on the main street was bright and sunny, and it was a nice spot to watch the bustle in the street.

“Phew, we bought a lot!”

“Indeed. It was time well spent.”

The Crawford siblings looked pleased. In contrast, Charlotte looked pallid and anxious. She’d barely touched her cake set.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Charlotte? Did you want to buy more?”

“It’s the complete opposite!” Charlotte cried out. With a trembling finger, she pointed at the mountain of shopping bags piled up behind them. They were all filled with clothes, accessories, and shoes for Charlotte. After the first boutique, they had gone around many more stores, having fun window shopping and picking up whatever caught their fancy. The siblings made her try on one outfit after another, and they bought most of it. Allen rejected the ones that were too revealing, so the contents of the bags were nothing but wholesome.

This, however, still seemed to be a source of concern for Charlotte. “I can’t believe you bought so many things just for me! Please don’t throw away your money like this!”

“But they all looked so good on you,” Allen replied casually. Charlotte looked cute in anything—airy, feminine clothes; simple, sporty clothes; sleek, elegant clothes; you name it. “I’d like to see you in all kinds of outfits at home too. You could even say I bought them for my own sake. So don’t worry about it.”

“Uh, ummm...” Charlotte looked down, turning bright red.

“What kind of reaction is that?” Allen wondered.

“You really are a natural, bro,” Eluka cackled as she took a bite of her large, rich crêpe. It was filled with fruits and whipped cream, but she ate it expertly without getting anything around her mouth. She squinted at him and added, “But seriously, your taste in clothes is awful. That skirt! It was way too long.”

“Huh? It was just under the knees. That’s on the short side.”

“Are you a *grandpa*? Ugh, you drive me crazy. Some people just don’t get young fashion.”

The siblings glared at each other. “Compared to your indecent taste, Eluka, I think mine is far more proper.”

“P-Please don’t quarrel,” Charlotte cut in anxiously. “Let’s be nice

to each other! You're brother and sister, after all!"

"Oh, sorry. But this doesn't even count as a quarrel," Allen told her with a reassuring smile. Such quibbles were commonplace when they used to live at home.

Eluka flashed a grin too. "That's right. If we really quarreled, there'd be blood on the scene."

"I don't even want to imagine it..." murmured Charlotte.

"Speaking of quarrels, though...it's not a bad idea," Allen pondered.

"You mean, as a 'naughty pleasure'?" Eluka asked.

"Indeed." Asserting herself wasn't Charlotte's strong point. If they had a mock quarrel, maybe she would get better at expressing her own opinions. He contemplated making her call him names as practice, as he had with the punching bag the other day.

"Well...maybe not."

"Oh, how come?" Eluka cocked her head quizzically.

"I'll probably get seriously depressed," Allen said solemnly. He didn't mind getting punched, but he was much more susceptible to mental or emotional attacks.

"You know, you look like the insolent type, but you actually have a heart of glass in the most unexpected situations."

"I-I'm not going to do anything like that!" Charlotte cried out and fixed him with an earnest look. "Quarrels are a bad thing, not a 'naughty pleasure'—understood?"

"All right, all right." Allen nodded with a sheepish smile.

Chatting about this and that, they spent a peaceful afternoon at the café. Before they knew it, the sun was starting to set, and they began to notice different kinds of people in the street. In the daytime, most of the passersby were ordinary citizens, but now they spotted more groups who looked like they were returning from an adventure in the dungeons. After sundown, they would likely crowd the bars and start drinking to the stories of their day's escapades.

Charlotte might get frightened. Allen thought, remembering the soldiers who had been pursuing her. Some of the travelers were wearing suits of armor with heavy chain mail. Charlotte didn't seem to be affected so far, but it was about time they got going anyway. He drained his teacup and announced, "So. Shall we head back?"

"Y-Yes. It's almost dinnertime." Charlotte nodded.

"Aww! The night's still young!" Eluka complained. "Look, I flagged some yummy restaurants in the guide book!"

"Uh...you're still hungry?" Allen asked incredulously. Eluka had polished off her supersized crêpe. Just looking at it had given him heartburn, but she clearly had a special room for sweets in her stomach.

“How about this place?” Eluka held out the guide book, sticky notes jutting from the edges, so Charlotte could see. “Their specialty is cheese. They’ve got chunky cheese pizza, cheese fondue, cheese-filled hamburger steak; it’s cheese heaven!”

“S-Sounds yum...” Charlotte gulped, her eyes glued to the photos. She had also eaten up the cake set, but apparently, sweets went down to a different stomach for her as well.

Now it was two against one. He took a step back to see how it unfolded. If Charlotte was in the mood, he wouldn’t mind going along with it. However, there was one problem: at the moment, Eluka was most definitely in the lead in their all-out battle to decide who could make Charlotte the happiest. There wouldn’t be any consequences if he lost, but as Charlotte’s guardian, he simply couldn’t admit defeat.

Of course, he would stop at nothing to drive away her enemies, and to let her spend her days cheerful and carefree. That was merely an obligation. He had to do more than that. He couldn’t rest till he brought her more and more happiness.

He was racking his brains for a good strategy when he caught sight of something. At the same time, the girls settled on the restaurant, so he announced, “Let’s go then, no time like the present! It’ll be on me, of course—hm?”

Eluka had frozen on the spot.

“What’s wrong, Eluka?” asked Charlotte.

Without even registering Charlotte’s question, she leaped from her chair and shot across the street toward a thin young man, then grasped his hands. The man was using a wheelchair, the wheels of which were slightly levitating.

“Excuse me, can I ask you something?!” she blurted.

“Huh?! Wh-What is it?”

“Where’d you get that enchanted wheelchair?! Which workshop?! I’ve never seen such a snazzy one!”

“Oh, this? It’s not from a workshop, actually... I made it myself.”

“Seriously?! Wow! From the looks of it, it’s just powered by wind magic, isn’t it? Amazing how stable it is with this combination of materials too.”

“Uh, well...” Though he was a little startled, Eluka struck up a lively discussion with him about magic. Her eyes sparkled in excitement, and she seemed to have forgotten all about Allen and Charlotte.

Charlotte had been watching her in awe, but eventually her face broke into a warm smile. “Eluka really loves magic, doesn’t she? That’s so nice. I hope I’ll find something to get that excited about...oh?” She paused and looked around, realizing she was alone at the table.

“Heyyy, over here,” Allen called to her from a little way off.

“Oh, Allen!” Charlotte went to join him at the street stall just by the café.

“Hello there, welcome.” A young woman, the shop owner, glanced up from her book to greet them, then immediately went back to her reading.

The stall was simple, built with scraps of fabric and wood, with a roof full of holes. It was a typical shop of cheap accessories. A range of necklaces and other jewelry were on offer, each priced at one silver coin.

Charlotte looked from the shop to Allen and tilted her head. “Are you looking to buy some jewelry, Allen?”

“No, something just caught my eye.” Allen carefully picked up a hair ornament in the shape of a flower, inlaid with blue gemstones. There was nothing extraordinary about it, but each petal was finished with a graceful flourish, which conveyed the care that went into making the piece. It had drawn his attention when he noticed this stall from their table at the café.

He put it in Charlotte’s hair and gazed at her for a few moments. Then he nodded in satisfaction. “I knew it. It’s the same color as your eyes.”

“Oh!” She gently touched the ornament in a daze. Her round eyes and the little flower that bloomed in her hair were almost exactly the same color. The ornament set off her eyes very nicely. Though her hair was black now, it would shine even more when he returned her hair to its natural golden color.

Allen nodded again and said to the shop owner, “Could I take this one?”

“Sure thing. That’ll be one silver coin.”

“Here. Keep the change.”

“Thanks... Uh, hang on! You gave me a gold coin! That’s way too much!” she spluttered.

“Keep it. I make it a rule to pay an appropriate fee for work that deserves it,” he replied, winking at her, then turned to Charlotte, who was still stunned. “Well, it’s not much compared to a mountain of clothes, but still... Let me give this to you.”

“Oh, no...” Charlotte murmured, as if in a dream. She blushed and stroked the ornament. “This...makes me the happiest.”



“R-Really?” Allen was a little flustered by her unexpected response. Though he was delighted that his gift pleased her, he was overwhelmed by a surge of embarrassment. His heart started beating in a chaotic rhythm—and he hadn’t even cast one of his death curses on himself.

They were both at a loss for words, and they stood rooted to the spot. The shop owner grinned at them and whistled.

Just then, a man who was laughing with his friend slammed into Charlotte as he walked by. Allen managed to catch her fall. He noted that she was slightly heavier than when he carried her into his mansion the other day, but she still needed to eat more. But he set his thoughts on her weight aside, since there was a much more troublesome issue at hand.

Two young men came to a halt right in front of Allen and Charlotte. They appeared to be adventurers coming back from a dungeon, as they were equipped with simple plate armor over their chest and limbs, and a large sword hung at each of their waists. They were fairly handsome, but due to their narrowed eyes and rough demeanor, they gave a coarse impression. To put it simply, they were typical thugs.

“The hell?”

“Whassat?”

Both men glared down at Charlotte.

“Eek...” she let out a small gasp, and color drained from her face.

Allen stepped in front of her and forced a friendly smile at them.

“Ah, sorry for my friend’s carelessness here. Allow me to apologize in her stead.”

Putting together everything they had done to Charlotte—they’d collided with her because they weren’t watching where they were going, they’d glared at her, and they’d frightened her—Allen deemed they had committed crimes that warranted pummeling them within an inch of their lives three times over and a little more.

However...she said quarreling is a bad thing, so... Allen knew that if he beat them up and frightened her, he might never recover from the shock. So he was trying to resolve the matter as peacefully as possible, without resorting to violence, even if that meant acting completely out of character.

“H-Hey! Be careful there...” the shop owner called out.

“Hm?”

She emerged from her stall to whisper in his ear. “You shouldn’t mess with these guys—they’re members of the adventuring party that’s been stirring up trouble around these parts. Better run away before it blows up. I’ll deal with it.”

“But then, you’ll be in trouble yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. You take care of your girl.”

Allen stood his ground. “Sorry, but I must protect you both. I won’t bring you into it, so please, just stand back.”

“Oh...don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She looked worried, but she drew back.

If what she said was true, he had some tricky people to deal with. He looked at Thug A, who had knocked into Charlotte, and Thug B. Thug A was sizing Allen up with a scowl. “You new ’round here?”

“You proly don’t even know we’re in the Grotto,” Thug B sneered, full of swagger.

“You’re right, it doesn’t ring a bell,” Allen answered.

It was standard practice for several adventurers to band together to form a party. Some parties grew as big as a platoon, and it was common for parties of that size to become a household name, but of course, there was no way for a misanthropic hermit like Allen to know any of those groups.

“If you let us go peacefully, I’ll spare you,” said Allen.

“Huh? You got some nerve—ah.” A vein stood out on Thug A’s temple, but it subsided in an instant. Then his mouth twisted into a mocking smirk. “Actually, sure, I’ll let you off the hook. But on one condition.”

“Glad you have some sense. How much do you want?” Allen replied, pulling out his wallet.

“No, something simpler than that.” Thug A sneered. He was staring at Charlotte. “We’ll borrow that girl for one night.”

Allen froze. “*What.*” He could comprehend the thug’s words—his meaning was clear. But there was a grave error in his neural system before he could process it. Blood drained from his fingertips, and he stopped breathing completely.

And how did the rogues react? They ignored Allen and leered at Charlotte. “She’s actually a hot chick. I’ve been getting bored with prostitutes these days, so it’s good timing.”

“Hey. Popped the cherry with your boyfriend yet?”

“Popped...the cherry? What does that mean?”

“You’re kidding! Girls don’t come like this anymore!” Their lewd guffaws rang out in the street. The passersby began to stop in their tracks and peer at them. Everyone seemed to sense something was wrong, but they were reluctant to step up and offer help. The thugs didn’t care how many people were watching. They reached out to grab Charlotte. “Hey, come with us. We’ll get you somethin’ nice, somethin’ better than that cheap trinket he got you.”

“Eek! P-Please don’t!”

“We know you wanna get some. We’ll make you feel better than

ever with our moves—”

THWACK!

The rest of the disgusting sentence was cut off. Before Allen could stop himself, he had landed a blow on Thug A's face. As if in slow motion, the man's face warped sideways, and all the onlookers drew in their breath.

Oops, now I've done it, Allen thought for a split second, but he swung his arm forward with all his might. “Go to hell, you worthless vermin!!!”

The thug hit a wall with tremendous force, leaving a giant crater. He didn't budge, but he was probably still alive. Allen had reluctantly dialed down the punch to make sure of that.

“You little...! You'll pay for that!” Thug B spat and drew his sword. Crimson flames flared up from the blade. It was likely an enchanted sword, enhanced by fire magic. With the sword publicly drawn, a tense murmur ran through the crowd.

“How dare you...” Allen didn't even flinch at the sparks flying from the sword as he sprang at the thug. “If you so much as lay a filthy finger on my Charlotte...” He threw an ice magic spell at the sword to disarm it. “I'll grate your sickening face till the last scrap of flesh is gone, you scum!”

He smashed his fist into the thug's stomach, making him spit out blood and breaking his sword in two. The thug toppled to the ground and lay motionless.

“Phew... That felt good.” Allen straightened up and wiped away the sweat on his forehead, as fresh as anything.

The crowd, who had been watching with bated breath, erupted into whoops and whistles. “Whoa!” “You got 'em good, man!” “Amazing job! Serves them right!” The shop owner joined in too, clapping as loud as she could. Apparently, these thugs had been notorious in this city. No one cared to check whether they were still alive.

“Why, thank you for the cheers—oh!” Allen was graciously acknowledging their support when he remembered. He whirled around to face Charlotte and apologized to her in a panic. “I-I'm sorry. I know you said quarrels are bad, but I couldn't stop myself... Did I scare you?”

“N-No...” Charlotte shook her head slowly, then gave him a soft smile. “Violence is bad, but I know you were protecting me. Besides...” She took his hand gently. Her delicate fingers weren't trembling at all, and he could feel her warmth spreading to his heart. “You could never frighten me, Allen.”

He was quiet for a few moments, then answered, “Good.” He could finally breathe a sigh of relief. It seemed he had managed to

avoid the irreparable situation of making Charlotte dislike or fear him.

Hm... Didn't I expect her to get sick of me in no time and leave? Allen had accepted that eventual outcome—or so he had thought. But somehow, unbeknownst to him, his feelings on the matter had changed. Was this the “change” that Eluka had noticed in him? “Hmph... So that’s what it is.”

“Yes?”

“Oh, nothing. Seems I’ve lost my edge.” He put a hand on her shoulder and said with a smile, “It appears...I’ve grown rather addicted to teaching you naughty pleasures.”

“R-Really?” Charlotte tilted her head.

Unfortunately, words like “romance” and “love” didn’t exist in Allen’s dictionary. Throughout his life, he had been far removed from those kinds of sweet and bittersweet experiences.

Charlotte was puzzled by Allen’s unusually bright and open manner, but she soon frowned anxiously. “But...I hope you weren’t hurt?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t let those lightweights get the better of me.”

“Wow. You’re so strong, Allen. You blew me away.” Charlotte praised him with a big smile.

“Uh, did I?” He let himself feel smug for a moment.

Charlotte turned her gaze to the pieces of filth lying crumpled on the ground, and her face fell a tiny bit. “But...what shall we do with them? If we leave them there, they’ll surely catch a cold.”

“We can just turn them over to the vigilante group or something.” If he was honest, he wanted to tie them up in strings like blocks of ham and toss them into the sea where sharks could get at them, but he let go of that idea for Charlotte’s sake.

Suddenly, the shop owner shouted, “H-Hey, you two! Look over there!”

“Hm?”

Turning to look where she was pointing, Allen and Charlotte saw a colossal figure stomping toward them. A hush fell over the crowd again as the ground rumbled with every step the giant took. He stopped next to the thugs, who were still passed out, and bellowed, “Well, well... Looks like someone took good care of our boys here.” He glowered menacingly at Allen.

The giant was one of the Rock People. As their name suggested, the Rock People were a species whose bodies were made of minerals. They were massive, their average height being about two times that of a human being. The physical attacks dealt from their hefty frames were simple but extremely powerful. The one standing in front of Allen now looked like he could send a human flying just with a casual

wave of his hand.

The giant downed a barrel of alcohol and crushed it as though it was a scrap of paper.

Ah, he must be the leader of the group those vermin mentioned. The Grotto, was it? Allen noticed a score of men on standby behind the giant. They all resembled the thugs that Allen had taken down, and they were all glaring daggers at him. There was no doubt about it—it was an explosive situation, and things were about to get messier.

“A-Allen...” Charlotte was trembling.

“Don’t worry, Charlotte,” he assured her with a smile. “Just leave it to me... Hm?” He raised an eyebrow and grew silent. For a few moments, he stared at the giant, then pointed at the giant in recognition. “Hey, you’re not Magus, are you?”

“I am... What about it?” The giant scowled dubiously.

“Ohh! It is you!” Allen exclaimed brightly. Puzzled, Magus’s henchmen looked at each other. “It’s been ages! How long has it been? Seven years? How’ve you been?”

“Watch who you’re talking to. I don’t know a human like you!”

“Well, I suppose it’s hard to tell faces apart when they’re a different species,” Allen chuckled. He was amused at how they’d run into each other in the strangest of circumstances. “It’s me. Allen Crawford from the Athena School of Magic.”

“What?!” A shudder ran through Magus’s mammoth figure. Everyone else stared in confusion.

CRASH!

Magus dropped to his knees and slammed his head against the ground. He dug his forehead into the dirt as he begged with a tremor, “I-I had no idea you were the Dark Overlord, Your Highness! Forgive my impertinence! Please...I beg of you!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Allen scoffed triumphantly and made a show of stroking his chin.

Commotion broke out around them. The henchmen were thrown into a panic, and they cried frantically at Magus, who was now hunched over like a little mound.

“What the?! What’s going on, boss?!”

“Yeah! He’s just a skinny wuss, you can knock him down in one punch!”

Magus grabbed the men and forced them to the ground, one after another. “Shut up, you lot! Don’t do anything more to provoke him!!!” The whole group were on their knees with their mouths shut in a matter of seconds.

Charlotte was frozen in confusion. “Uh? Um...how is this happening?”

“Oh wait, Allen hasn’t told you?”

“Eluka!”

Eluka had come back to join them at some point. The boy in the wheelchair wasn't with her, but she was holding a thick wad of notes instead, probably filled with details on the materials and spells used for his wheelchair. She went on in a carefree tone, “You see, Papa is the chief director of Athena School of Magic, the biggest school of witchcraft and wizardry in this country.”

Athena School of Magic was a prestigious institution with a long and illustrious history spanning centuries. It was said that just being a graduate of this school ensured success in your future. Students from all over the world flocked to it to hone their skills in magic and sword fighting in a diverse community.

“I-I see. That's why you're both so good at magic.”

“Yup. And as for him...” Eluka paused and smirked meaningfully at Allen. “He graduated at the tender age of twelve, the youngest graduate in the history of the school, and he went straight into teaching there—a child prodigy.”

“What?!” Charlotte let out a shrill cry.

“Oh? Didn't I mention it?” Allen cocked his head. He hadn't meant to keep it a secret.

“B-But you said when you were around my age, you were still at school...”

“Yeah, as a professor of practical training in magic.”

“You never told me that!”

Come to think of it, he did say he was “at the school,” but he probably forgot to mention he was on the teaching side. But in any case, these were things of the past. “I quit teaching three years ago, when I was eighteen,” he explained with a wry smile. “I liked the job well enough, but I couldn't take it anymore.”

“You must have gone through a lot of hardships...”

“Yeah. I was beating up all the insolent brats to straighten them out, then I was interrogated by the faculty, who didn't like me to start with.”

“And you clobbered the professors too. Even Papa couldn't cover for you.”

“I see... You went through a lot...” Charlotte murmured, averting her eyes a little.

“Why'd you leave out the ‘hardships’ part that time?” Allen asked. Then he turned to the giant. “Anyway, you haven't changed at all, Magus.” With a sunny smile, he crouched down and patted Magus's head.

“Uh, yes sir...” Since the Rock People's faces were made of rocks, just like the rest of their body, it was hard to make out their expressions. But Magus was obviously tense with fear. He was

trembling so much that the rocks of his body scraped against each other, raining down little flecks of sand.

Allen pretended not to notice and continued cheerfully, “I recall the first time I taught you. You were spouting some nonsense like ‘I can finish off this scamp with one blow’—remember that?”

Back then, Allen had been only fourteen, and it was understandable that Magus would underestimate him. Though after a session of his “educational instruction”—which he dealt out to all the rebellious students in one go—Magus had become much more docile.

Tormented by this memory, Magus started shivering even more violently. He groveled even more desperately, ramming his forehead against the ground and bawled, “P-Please forgive me, Dark Overlord! I didn’t mean to bother you at all! I didn’t even know you were in this city!”

“Um... What’s ‘Dark Overlord’?” Charlotte whispered to Eluka.

“Oh, bro’s nickname when he was a professor,” Eluka said simply.

That was why Allen was dissatisfied with Miach calling him “Dark Lord.” It was a preposterous nickname for him—because it was one rank lower than “Overlord.” It had been a while since someone called him “Dark Overlord,” and he chuckled, relishing the euphoric sound of the title in his ears.

“Lift your head, Magus. You haven’t particularly bothered me.”

“Th-Then—” Magus looked up with hope shining in his eyes.

“No, you haven’t bothered *me*,” Allen went on.

A deep fissure of concern ran through Magus’s forehead. The air froze. Everyone looked on in taut silence.

Allen slowly twisted up his lips. “Your thugs tried to harm my...” He paused. *My...what?* He realized he didn’t really know. *Just a guest staying at my house? A second sister? Or...* He pushed away the word that almost rose to his mind, and instead, he asserted, “My special girl.” That was the most he could bring himself to say just then.

In that moment, Allen’s face caught the light of the setting sun, and the dazzling, crimson glow gilded his smile. The fiery scene was supremely fitting for the Dark Overlord.



Two hours later, the sky was completely dark, and the streetlamps lining the main street were lit with magic. Even then, there was a real buzz about the shops on the street.

“Hey, bro!”

“Ah, you’re back.” Allen had been sipping tea at the café terrace by himself when Eluka and Charlotte returned. They were both beaming, their skin smooth and shiny.

“It was sooo good! We ate our own body weight in cheese!”

“Oh, yes. I’m so full.”

“Good, glad to hear it,” Allen grinned at Charlotte. “All right then, let’s get going—hm?” Something in the street caught his eye. He sprang up from his chair, drew in a deep breath, and yelled, “You right there! You’ve got some nerve to slack off! Snap to it and pick up more trash!!!”

“Y-Yes, sir! I’m sorry!” One of the hoodlums, who was having a stretch, gave Allen a deep bow.

Magus and his henchmen, who were scattered around the main street, went pale and trembled in fear. Every single one of them was tattered with wounds, but they were all working hard at picking up litter, carrying luggage for elderly people, cleaning up graffiti on the walls, and doing other kinds of service. There was no trace of the tyrannical adventuring party who had been harassing the people of the city. They had transformed into a volunteer group. It was the result of Allen’s thorough coaching and edification, which he had undertaken while Charlotte and Eluka were off having dinner.

“It’s incredible how effective you were,” the accessory shop owner came over and told Allen with a half smile. She was just about to go home after closing up shop. She surveyed the Grotto bunch and looked deeply impressed. “Those guys were picking fights everywhere, littering the streets, annoying everyone with their noise all the time, and so much more... We were all fed up with them. But now, they’re completely reformed.”

“But how?” Charlotte asked.

The shop owner mumbled something and looked away to dodge her question. “Anyhow...I won’t be surprised if everyone in town starts calling you the Dark Overlord. Anyone who sees what we saw would never even think of going against you.”

“Hm. I did go easy on them, you know.”

“I wonder what could’ve happened in the past two hours...” Charlotte still looked baffled, but she didn’t press them.

Allen shrugged at the shop owner. “Well, don’t feel obliged or anything. I only took my personal revenge, that’s all.”

“You’re a funny guy,” the shop owner chortled and turned to Charlotte. “Lucky you’ve got a boyfriend you can count on. He clearly takes good care of you.”

“Oh, um...”

“Uh, we’re not really—” Allen stopped mid-sentence. He’d denied it straight out to Eluka earlier that day, but for some reason, the words got stuck in his throat.

Seeing them both clam up, the shop owner grinned. “Ah, I get it... Is that how it is?”

“Looks like it,” Eluka nodded.

What's that supposed to mean? Allen couldn't even formulate a retort, and before he could say anything else, the shop owner bowed to him and went on her way. Trying to shake off the awkwardness, he downed the tea, now gone completely cold, and coughed. "Uhh... Shall we head home?"

"Y-Yes. Let's." Charlotte nodded, also stiff. They were clearly conscious of what the shop owner had said, but were both too scared to bring it up.

Allen turned to the street and bellowed, "Listen up! I'm going to leave the city for now, but remember, if you slack off, my curse will activate immediately! Keep that in mind as you do your service!"

"Y-Yessir!" the group shouted in unison.

The curse was on the lighter side, so it wouldn't kill them—the most it would do is make them start hiccuping nonstop. But since he hadn't filled them in on the effect of the curse, they were still quaking with fear. That way, they'd go on with their volunteer service with diligence.

"Right, let's go. We'll have to clean up a room for Eluka to stay in when we get back."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Eluka said casually.

"Huh?" Allen widened his eyes. "Didn't you say you were staying? Are you going back home?"

"Uh-uh. I booked a place to stay in town. So you two go on home without me."

"Wh-Why did you do that?" asked Charlotte.

"Well, I mean, I feel like I'm gonna suffocate if I live under the same roof with this guy." Eluka picked up her shopping bags and winked at them with a smirk. "But I'll still come and hang out with you pretty often, so I'll be expecting a warm welcome."

"What about our battle? Postponed?"

"Nah. I'll take the L."

"What?!" Allen was indignant. They had spent all day on this ruthless battle to see who could make Charlotte the happiest—how could she admit defeat so easily? "I'm not satisfied with that! You'd better give me a proper reason!"

"Think about it yourself. That's your homework." Eluka grinned and waved at Charlotte. "See you soon, Charlotte! Take care of him for me!"

"S-Sure...but isn't it the other way around?" Charlotte looked puzzled as she waved back at Eluka.

Eluka disappeared into the crowd, leaving Allen and Charlotte by themselves. They had been alone together until Eluka came along, and everything seemed the same on the surface. And yet, it was obvious that, for some reason, each of them was very conscious of the other.

They felt awkward. But it wasn't an unpleasant kind of awkwardness.

"Shall we head home?" Allen asked.

"Y-Yes."

Repeating the same conversation once more, they clumsily started on their way back.



After leaving the pair, Eluka skipped toward her lodging. "Ah, that was fun. Glad to see bro's enjoying life," she said, crossing her hands behind her head and looking up at the sky.

A bright moon hung in the sky, almost full. Though she couldn't see many stars in the city, it wasn't a bad view. Gazing at the moon, Eluka thought back on the events of the day. Her face softened into a smile—one with a hint of self-mockery.

She really had wished to make Charlotte happy. And of course, she hadn't had any intention of losing to Allen, so she had tackled the battle with all her might. But she had missed one crucial point: there had already been a clear winner from the very beginning.

"In the end, the only naughty things I can teach her are fashion and good food." Both of which had gone down phenomenally well with Charlotte. If things had kept going the same way, Eluka would have scored her victory. However, those pleasures faded in comparison to what Allen could give her.

Was it his gift of the hair ornament? Or protecting her from the hoodlums? No, those things alone wouldn't have been enough to make Eluka admit defeat. The deciding factor was, of course—

"A naughty lesson in falling in love. Well, that's something only he can teach her... Oh?" Eluka stopped in her tracks. She saw a little incident unfolding in one corner of the street.

A thug was appealing to someone. "Hello there! Is there anything I can help you with?!"

"Please let us help you with something! If we don't...we'll die from a curse!!!" Another added.

Cornered by the hoodlums, the boy in the wheelchair was at a loss. "Uhh... What's up with you people?"

Eluka stared at them for a little while. Then, shrugging in resignation, she walked toward them to give the boy a helping hand.

Chapter 6: The First Naughty Day Out

One cloudy morning in the beginning of summer, Miach came to Allen's mansion on her usual delivery route with a small package and a newspaper.

"Good mooornin—meow?" She stopped in surprise. And no wonder—Allen was sitting outside the front door with his head in his hands. "Wh-What's up, Dark Lord? Whatcha doing out here?"

Allen lifted his head to look up at her. "Oh, it's you, Miach," he murmured, his voice hoarse. He was deathly pale, with dark circles under his eyes, and he knew how haggard he looked. He looked like he could break down any minute. He had been up all night worrying over something. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not the 'Dark Lord,' I'm the 'Dark Overlord'..."

"But ya look like a 'Dark Lord' kinda guy to me."

"You're talking nonsense..."

"Even your comebacks are weak. What happened to you?"

Just then, Eluka bounded into the scene with a cheerful greeting. "Yoohoo! Your adorable little sister's come for a visit! Entertain me, bro!"

"Meow?" Miach's ears flicked, and she bowed to Eluka with a bright smile. "Good mornin' to ya, Eluka."

"Morning, Miach! Your cat ears are looking adorbs, as always!"

"Aw, you're too kind!"

The girls had gotten to know each other through Allen, and they'd become close enough to occasionally meet up in the city for tea. They continued their perky chat, but eventually their talk turned to Allen.

"By the way, what's up with him?" Eluka asked Miach.

"Who knows? He was already like that when I got here."

"Hmm...let me guess, bro." Eluka pointed at him with a flash in her eyes. "Something happened between you and Charlotte, am I right?"

"Ack... H-How'd you know?!"

"I mean, is there anything else in the world that would shake you up like this?"

"Ya do tend to aggressively resolve problems yourself, most of the time," Miach observed. In contrast to Allen, who was all in a fluster, the girls were totally cool. In any case, they had a point. Nothing

could have made him so worried except Charlotte. What's more, this time, the situation was causing him a big headache.

"Didja have a fight with her or something?" Miach asked.

"I wish it were that simple..." Allen replied with a self-deprecating sneer. Then he began to recount the incident that had taken place the night before.



Last night, after dinner, Allen broached the subject. "You know, Charlotte, it's already been a month since you came here."

"Wow...I didn't realize I've been here so long," she remarked thoughtfully, sipping her tea. She went quiet, thinking over everything that had happened. Only a month, but a whole month. It seemed long but short at the same time.

"Which means," Allen went on with a smirk, "it's your payday!" He held out a small leather pouch across the table.

"Oh!" She stared at it in surprise. After a few moments, she seemed to register what was inside. She sprang up from her chair and shook her head firmly. "P-Payday... I can't possibly take that!"

"Why are you so surprised? I hired you, so of course I'm going to pay your wages."

"But...so far, I've only done a little cleaning." These days, she was learning to cook, but burnt sunny-side ups and bland soups were the best she could do so far. In other words, she was not much better than Allen. She slumped her shoulders apologetically. "I just don't think I'm being useful enough to deserve any money. Actually, I think I should be paying you rent..."

"What are you saying? You do a great job of cleaning every day. Thanks to you, there's no dust in the house and I can live in comfort." Allen would have had no problem at all continuing to live in a garbage dump, but it wasn't as though he didn't appreciate comfort. His quality of life had certainly leaped to new heights since Charlotte came, with her very attentive cleaning. "So here's the fee befitting your work. I want you to accept it."

"I see..." Perhaps because she knew full well how pushy he could be, she reluctantly took the leather pouch. She peeked inside and exclaimed in shock. "F-Five gold coins?! This is far too much!"

"Is it? This is much less than what I wanted to give you at first, since I thought you wouldn't take it."

"How much was there in the beginning?!"

He wasn't sure how many coins exactly, but he had crammed in as much as the pouch could take without ripping apart. Since he knew it would only fluster her to hear this, he changed the subject. "Anyway, while it's good to have savings, I'd recommend spending it, at least a

little. You probably didn't have any money you could spend freely before, did you?"

"Well...no, that's true."

"There must be things you want to do, or buy. Try spending it on something, anything you want." Everything Charlotte needed in her daily life—clothes, shoes, and other necessities—Allen had bought for her. But she never expressed her own wish to get something. Since she was a lodger, that was understandable, but Allen wasn't content.

"But I don't have anything in particular—oh!" She paused, as though she realized something. She looked from the pouch to Allen, and gulped a little. It was a slightly strange reaction, but she seemed to have thought of a way to use the money. She straightened up and looked at him with upturned eyes. "Then, um...I'd like to...only if it's possible..."

"Sure, what is it? Tell me anything," Allen encouraged her, excited to hear her express her own wish for the very first time.

"I...I'd like to go to the city by myself," she said nervously.

Allen caught his breath in shock.



When he finished retelling the scene, Allen groaned with his head in his hands, tormented by the mere thought of it. "Letting her go to the city by herself... It's like throwing in the best, well-marbled sirloin beef into a cage of wild beasts! I just can't allow that to happen!"

All kinds of dangerous scenarios crossed his mind. What if she gets harassed by thugs like the other day? What if she gets lost? What if she falls and hurts herself, or worse, her cover is blown and she gets arrested?

"But I want to let her have whatever she wants as much as possible... What am I supposed to—hm?" He cut himself off and glanced up at his audience.

The girls were absorbed in their own conversation, completely ignoring Allen. "Oh really? Their pancakes are that bad? But they've got a long line in front of their shop every day," Eluka was saying to Miach.

"They're mostly decoys, y'see. You're much better off going to that hole-in-the-wall—"

"Hey! Are you even listening to me?!" Allen yelled.

They looked at each other innocently, then sighed in unison.

"But I mean, it's just too pathetic," Miach said.

Allen rushed to his feet. "What do you mean, pathetic?! The nerve! This is a serious predicament!"

Eluka, meanwhile, was stroking her chin thoughtfully. "It's unusual for her to say something like that, isn't it? Normally, she'd be

too worried about being found out and causing trouble for you to do anything remotely risky.”

“Yeah... She thought the same thing last night and took it back immediately,” explained Allen. She’d looked down and said with a sad smile, “Please forget what I just said.” But her melancholy expression had lit a flame in his chest. He leaned back against the front door and covered his face. “When she says it like that...you just want to make it happen for her at all costs, you know?”

“So you made a rash promise, huh?” Eluka said.

“Ya really are a complicated guy.” Miach shrugged along with Eluka. They looked like they couldn’t care less. It irritated Allen, but he couldn’t come up with a rejoinder. They were too much in the right.

To put it in a nutshell, he had readily consented to letting Charlotte go out by herself right after that exchange. Once he’d managed to convince her that, with his magic of disguise, there was no possibility of her getting recognized, her anxiety seemed to wane. Beaming, she had resolved to go to the city. And today was the fateful day of her journey, he explained.

“Huh?” Eluka blurted out, her face deadpan. “What ‘journey’? It’s only like, a twenty-minute walk.”

“It’s a long way to go! And the path through the forest is so bumpy—what if she trips?!”

The two girls looked at him with frigid eyes. “You’re more overprotective than a new dad,” Miach remarked.

So far, Allen had accompanied Charlotte whenever she stepped out of the house, even for short walks. They were together most of the time, and he watched over her closely. How could he send her to a place swarming with dangers, no less than twenty minutes away? In truth, he was going insane just thinking about it. *But this is her very first wish! I simply have to make it happen for her, on my honor...*

Besides, Charlotte was already getting ready for her day out. She had been busy making various preparations from early in the morning. He couldn’t possibly say no now. Though Allen was never one to give a hoot about what people thought of him, he couldn’t bear to do anything that might disappoint Charlotte.

He realized then how much he had changed. *More and more often, I can’t stop thinking about her. What’s happening to me?* He still wanted her to smile, and he didn’t want to see her sad—that part hadn’t changed. But now, this feeling was growing many times stronger. He didn’t understand why. A thought that was deeply out of character for him almost crossed his mind, but he waved it away in a panic.

Eluka stared at Allen in utter disbelief. “Anyway...you know there’s a simple solution to your problem, bro.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s obvious,” Miach said, nodding. “If you’re too worried to let her go by herself...there’s only one thing ya can do.”

“What I can do...” Allen chewed it over. Then he was struck by a brilliant idea. “Oh! I can watch over her in secret from the shadows!”

“How did he not even consider that until now?” Eluka sighed.

“Well, they say *something* makes ya blind,” Miach laughed.

Ignoring the girls’ unsubtle mockery, Allen was on fire for the new mission. It was time for the next naughty lesson: a solo day out.



One hour later, Charlotte was set to go. She stood at the front door, her hair magicked black, holding a small bag. She was wearing the hair ornament that Allen had given her, all dressed up for a day in the city. But she looked grim as she peered into the mirror and carefully checked her appearance.

“Wh-What do you think? Would anyone recognize me?”

“Of course not, you’re fine. And it’s a spell that only I can undo, so don’t worry.”

“If you say so, Allen.” She beamed. Bracing herself, she took one step out the door. She looked straight ahead at the narrow path stretching from the mansion to the city. Then, she looked back at Allen somewhat nervously and said, “Well then...I’m off now. I’ll make sure to be back before sunset.”

“Right. If you can, bring back some food for dinner too.”

“Okay!” She gave a light bow and started on her way with cautious steps. She looked a little anxious, but at the same time, the strength of her will to take on a new challenge was palpable. Her figure, illuminated by sunlight, was quite picturesque.

Allen dabbed his eyes. “Ah...only a short while ago, she was just a little girl, looking so lost and uncertain, as delicate as a doll... When did she grow so strong, standing on her own two feet like that?”

Eluka and Miach emerged from their hiding place and threw him glacial looks. “Seriously, who do you think you are?” Eluka jibed.

“You’re really creeping me out,” Miach added.

In any case, Allen was content—what a beautiful example of her growth he had witnessed! He was wholeheartedly glad that he had let her go by herself. But now, this was where the difficult task began. With a swoosh of his robe, he pointed straight at the city. “Come, time to go on our mission! We’ll do everything in our power to support Charlotte’s day out from backstage!”

“I’m down if you’ll pay me for my time!” Miach quipped.

“I’ll go for the story—I’m gonna tell Papa and Mama all about it when I get home,” Eluka said.

And so, Allen headed for the city in high spirits, bringing along his companions, but always exercising the utmost care not to be discovered by Charlotte in this highly covert operation.



The city was bustling, as always. It was a little cloudy in the morning, but the sky cleared up as the sun climbed higher, and soon it was a perfect day for a shopping stroll around town. When Charlotte reached the main street crowded with people, she let out a small sigh. “Wow... I’m really here, all by myself.”

Though a mere twenty minutes on foot from the mansion, it was still a formidable journey for her. She gazed at the main street overwhelmed for a little while, but before long, she came to herself and clenched her fists.

“All right! Here goes nothing. I’ll do my very best!”

She pulled a small map from her bag, studied it carefully, and started on her way down the main street.

Of course, Allen was watching her every move, hiding behind a building nearby.



“Good job! You’re doing great, Charlotte! You read the map just as I taught you! I knew you could do it!”

Before her departure, he had given her some basic words of caution: look at the map; don’t go along with strangers; ask for directions if you get lost; and so on. Charlotte seemed to be following his instructions to a T. Even when staff called out to her from the shops, she bowed politely and declined.

So far, her first day out was going splendidly. Allen felt his heart getting squeezed even more. He felt like a parent who had just witnessed the moment when his little baby managed to stand for the very first time. Of course, it didn’t matter that he had zero experience in raising a child.

Nearby, Eluka and Miach whispered among themselves.

“Seriously, who does he think he is?”

“Hmm, an older brother or a father, p’haps?”

“But I mean, even from that perspective...it’s cringy, right?”

“Yup... Hopelessly cringe...”

“Quiet, you two!” Allen muttered under his breath, careful not to blow their cover.

The three of them flitted from one shadow of a building to the next, tracing Charlotte’s steps.

“By the way, bro. Why did Charlotte want to go to the city in the first place?”

“Umm...all she told me was that she wanted to do some shopping.”

“Ya didn’t ask what she wanted to get?” Miach asked.

“I tried to, but...” Naturally, Allen was eager to know what Charlotte wanted, but when he asked her, she only averted her eyes hesitantly and asserted, in all seriousness, “That’s...um...a s-secret!”

“She never told me in the end,” he sighed.

“Ah, right...” Eluka murmured.

“It must’ve been a real blow for ya, Dark Lord,” Miach said, attempting to console him.

“Yeah...” Allen nodded gravely. Just a few days ago, he wouldn’t have imagined it was possible for Charlotte to keep any secrets from him. He pressed a trembling hand to his mouth. “If she can have her own secret, that’s proof that her sense of self is becoming stronger... Good for you, Charlotte! Next step, you’ll learn to be so selfish you’ll give me a headache!”

Eluka eyed him dubiously. “You’re going beyond creepy and getting a bit worrisome...” But she realized something and added, “If we keep on trailing her like this, won’t we see what she buys? That means you’ll uncover her secret without her even knowing about it. Is

that cool?"

"Not a problem. If that happens, I'll immediately erase our memories with magic."

"Your commitment is so heavy it makes me dizzy just thinking about it," Miach muttered.

While they were having this trivial conversation, Charlotte was walking further and further into the city. Before they knew it, she was heading into quiet back alleys. The three of them could hear her murmuring things like "Hmm," and "That's odd," as she scrutinized the map.

"Are there any shops she'd be interested in in such an out-of-the-way spot?" Allen wondered.

"Ah...maybe she took a wrong turn," Eluka said.

"What?! That's a major crisis!" he gasped.

Perhaps it was to be expected that Charlotte would get lost. For many years now, she had been living with the Duke's family like their servant, so it was likely the first time she'd ever walked through a city by herself, with only a map to guide her. Allen regretted from the bottom of his heart not teaching her to read the map more thoroughly, but at least he hadn't forgotten to teach her to ask people for directions if she got lost. At some point, she was sure to ask a passerby.

"Yeah, but...this way is dodgy," Miach said nervously, just as Allen was breathing a sigh of relief.

"Hm? What do you mean?" he asked.

"She's heading toward the Maerd District—it's a sketchy part of town, y'see," Miach murmured, turning slightly pale. "Rowdy adventurers are prowling around there all the time."

"What?!"

"Oh, I might've heard that rumor too," Eluka cut in. "There's a super dangerous adventuring party, whatchamacallit, ruling over the area around the entryway."

"Yup. The Serpent's Fangs, that's what they're called."

The Serpent's Fangs was a group of hoodlums headed by a man named Groh, a viper charmer. They were known to snatch away the profits of other parties; blackmail and extortion were a matter of course for them. Sometimes they mugged ordinary people who wandered into their territory by accident. All in all, they were a typical bunch of adventurers who had gone to the dogs.

And now, it was the base of this that Charlotte approached. Even as Eluka and Miach exchanged whispers, Charlotte kept walking down the alley. Her pace had slowed due to anxiety, but there was no question that she would eventually reach the treacherous district.

"What do we do, bro? Should I go and pretend I've bumped into

her by accident?"

"No...I want to avoid helping her straight out as much as possible," Allen replied. This wasn't just any old trip to the city. This was an adventure that Charlotte had embarked upon by her own will. He certainly didn't want to do anything to spoil it. He mulled over it for a few moments, then looked up. "Right. I'll leave you here to watch over her for now."

"Huh? Where're you off to, bro?"

"I have a bit of business to take care of. Make sure you protect her!"

"Okay?" Miach and Eluka looked puzzled, but Allen leaped up and bolted over the rooftops.

Ten minutes later, Charlotte finally arrived at the district in question. The alley was narrow, and empty bottles littered the ground. Many of the buildings had broken windows. The air was gloomy and stagnant—even the sunlight seemed to dim in the grim surroundings. Anyone could tell at a glance that it was a bad neighborhood.

"Where could this be?" Charlotte clutched the map to her chest and glanced around her apprehensively. The place was deserted. But when she took a timid step forward—

BANG!

A door swung wide open, and a throng of people emerged from the building across the street. Most of them were shady, heavily-equipped adventurers. Most were human, but there were nonhumans too, including werewolves and merpeople.

"Eep..." Charlotte gasped and backed away.

Eluka and Miach, watching in secret, were also thrown into a panic, shouting over each other. "Wait, this is bad!" "We have to act now!"

Just as they were about to jump out from their hiding place, something astonishing happened. Every single one of the thugs bowed all at once.

"Welcome to our home!"

"You've come a long way!"

"Make yourself at home!"

"Let us give you a treat!!!"

"Oh, um...what?" Charlotte could only stammer. But the men kept shouting greetings at her as they brought out a chair and a table. They ushered her into the chair and poured some tea for her, and a couple of them even started strumming a guitar and a harp. It was a welcome fit for a queen.

Eluka and Miach stared at each other.

"What the hell is this?" Eluka murmured.

"Who knows?"

At that moment, Allen returned and said, "Phew, made it in time."

"Hey! You're back! Where've you been, bro? Wait, what do you mean, 'made it in time'?"

"Simple," he said in a leisurely tone, observing how Charlotte was getting on. She looked rather taken aback by the sudden greeting, but her expression had softened a little. She seemed relieved to be able to sit down after her long walk. *Exactly according to my plan*, he thought with a satisfied grin. "I circled ahead and put a bit of pressure on the gang controlling the district—the Serpent's Fangs, was it? And I ordered them to give a warm welcome to the girl who's about to come by."

"You're worse than a papa bear!" Eluca said.

"Oh, that's why they all look battered, huh?" Miach remarked.

Though none of the thugs were actually bleeding, they were clearly wounded. Their armor was cracked and falling to pieces, and they were sporting bruises and swollen welts everywhere on their bodies.

Both Eluca and Miach gave Allen the side-eye. But he offered an explanation to justify himself. "I didn't go so far as to make them bleed. Bloody thugs might scare Charlotte, after all."

"Bro, do you even know what the word 'humane' means?"

"Of course I do. It means doing what's humanly possible to make my own way."

"Uh, anyhoo, I s'ppose that'll curb their shenanigans," Miach laughed half-heartedly. She was staring at a heavysset man who was slumped against a wall with a giant snake around his neck. It was Groh, the ex-leader of the Serpent's Fangs. He had been dethroned from his position as the boss just a few minutes ago when Allen easily defeated him. He had a big bump on his head, and even the snake hung limp and motionless.

"How did *I*, the great leader, get so low?" he grumbled.

"Can't help it," one of his henchmen said, trying to comfort him. "You were out of luck the moment that madman singled you out."

In contrast to the group who was trying to welcome Charlotte with as much hospitality as they could muster, an air of utter gloom surrounded Groh. He heard a timid voice addressing him.

"Um..." It was Charlotte. She got up from her seat and peered into Groh's face. Though she seemed a little hesitant in front of such a burly, formidable man, she had a determined look in her eyes that overpowered her fear. "A-Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

"Umm, well, y-you seem to be hurt, so..." She looked apprehensively at the bump on Groh's head. Then she rummaged in her bag to take out a small phial. "Here, this is a magic potion. Please

use it, if you like. Here's another one for your poor snake friend."

"Oh...th-thank you so much!" Groh took it, half sobbing. It's no wonder he was touched—he had suddenly lost his place on the throne and had been in the throes of misery, only to find an offer of respite from an unexpected source. Even the most jaded people would be moved by such a gesture.

Apparently, Charlotte noticed that the others had bumps and bruises too. She promptly took out countless potions from her bag and handed them out attentively to each person.

Watching the scene unfold, Eluka murmured in amazement, "That's an enchanted bag, isn't it? It's hyperspace inside, so you can pack in a whole lot of stuff."

"Even so, that sure is a lotta bottles... Just how many didja give her?" asked Miach.

"Hmm. Maybe about a hundred or so, just in case," Allen replied.

"Math isn't your strong suit, is it?" Miach teased.

"What did you expect would happen to her on a trip to the city?" Eluka added.

They regarded Allen with skeptical looks, but he was ready with an explanation again. "Knowing Charlotte, if she met an injured dog or cat or something like that, I thought she'd definitely try to heal them with the potions. I gave her a big load and told her they're cheap, so she can feel free to give them away as she wishes—that way, she wouldn't get worried under any circumstances." What he hadn't accounted for was that she would hand them out not to wounded animals, but to the thugs that he himself had beaten up.

Charlotte went around the group, talking to each one of them and handing them the phials. The whole gang, who had been putting on a noisy show of welcoming her, fell silent. Eventually, someone blurted out, "She's a goddess..."

"That's right...she's the goddess divine..."

"Oh, our dear goddess! I'm going to mend my ways and live an honest life from now on!" Groh fell to his knees at Charlotte's feet and started weeping.

"Uh, umm. What's going on, everyone?" Charlotte asked, flustered.

The fervor of the whole group shot up to a peak, and thus a new religion was born.

Allen hadn't foreseen this scenario, but he nodded smugly. "Hmph. Charlotte, you really do have a knack for winning people over."

"Now that's what they call a pot stirrer and a peacemaker, all in one," Eluka observed.

"And she did it all without even knowing it. She's a natural talent,

that girl,” Miach added.

Now the gang wanted to entertain Charlotte sincerely, not just for show. Every single one of them beamed brightly as they crowded around her. It was a bizarre scene. Allen had seen something like it once before, when he had sneaked into a gathering of a bogus religious cult.

“By the way, my goddess,” Groh said, cocking his head, “what’s your relation to that Dark Overlord?”

“Are you all acquainted with Allen?”

“Well, ‘acquainted’ is one way to put it...”

“We kinda didn’t have a choice but to get to know him...” The men drearily looked at each other.

Allen had strictly forbidden them to say anything about his visit, but there was always a chance that they might let it slip by accident. *You better not say anything about me...or else.* Just in case, he took aim, readying himself to cast a long-distance sniper spell. Luckily, the conversation took a turn, and he didn’t need to use it.

“Um, well...I don’t have a home to go back to anymore,” Charlotte explained, murmuring one word at a time, with a slightly melancholy smile. “But Allen kindly took me in and hired me as his maid... So if you’d like to know our ‘relation,’ I could call him...” she paused, and went on shyly, “my M-Master, I suppose?”

Of course, it was a perfectly accurate statement, since their official positions were supposed to be those of an employer and his maid. But in this context, the word had such an immoral, salacious ring to it. Her blush didn’t help matters either. Allen pressed a hand to his chest with a groan.

“Hey, bro. You okay?”

“I got heartburn just watchin’ ya,” Miach said.

Miach and Eluka both looked at Allen frostily, but it wasn’t just them who were concerned. Groh and his men also exchanged looks, and anxiously asked her another question. “Our dear goddess...could it be that he’s hoodwinking you?”

“Or maybe he threatened her into obeying him, like he did to us!”

“Ugh...that vile Overlord! How could he deceive such a wonderful person...”

Their compassion for Charlotte fueled their grudges against Allen, and soon the crowd was as fired up as a group of rebels rising against an oppressor.

Allen could only look on with a sour face. “Those idiots...” he muttered. But at the same time, he was well aware that, compared to Charlotte, he looked as disreputable as a real criminal. He was the Dark Overlord, who casually wrecked a gang of thugs while humming a tune. In contrast, she was a young girl who treated everyone with

the kindness of a gentle goddess. Anyone who saw the pairing was bound to suspect something ominous.

But Charlotte giggled. "Thank you for worrying about me. But Allen is a kind person. He's not like that at all."

"Really? Are you sure?"

Though they still seemed troubled, they trusted her word. "Who would've thought that Dark Overlord could have human emotions?"

Charlotte pressed on with a big smile, "Oh yes. Allen's teaching me lots of naughty things!"

The gang froze in shock.

Oblivious to their reaction, she touched her forehead with the back of her hand and spoke dreamily, "Just the other day, Allen and I were being naughty all night. Even though I knew what we were doing was improper...I had such a fun time."

Allen recalled the night when they had stayed up late with sweets and games, then slept in the next day, lazing around till the afternoon. Indeed, it had been a fun night. However...

"Bro..." "Dark Lord..." Eluca and Miach muttered.

For the first time, Allen regretted his poor choice of words. "I'll warn her not to talk about it in public..."

"Oh, I should get going. Thank you very much for everything," Charlotte said with a bow, completely unaware of the tense atmosphere.

The members of the Serpent's Fangs watched her go in silence. In fact, they had been rendered utterly speechless by Charlotte's confession.

"Phew...looks like we've averted the crisis," said Allen, stepping out from his hiding place.

"Hey, it's you!" The gang shrank back, but showered him with a chorus of boos and hisses.

"What do you think you're doing to our dear goddess?!" shouted one.

"To be honest, I'd rather die than fight with you again...but if it's for our goddess, I'm ready to lay down my life!!!" roared another.

"Hsssss!!!" Even Groh's snake joined in, baring his fangs at Allen in obvious animosity.

"Ugh, it's a misunderstanding. Listen up!" Allen had no choice but to give them a brief explanation. When he finished he glared at the group and cleared his throat. "So that's how things stand. Your cooperation is commended. I'll return to watching over Charlotte. You can go off and do whatever you want."

"Jeez...you really beat us up just for the goddess...unbelievable..."

"Well, I feel like I can do anything if it's for her..."

"Aye, true..." The men nodded to each other, apparently failing to

come up with any more words to describe their feelings for her.

Allen smiled breezily at them. "If you lay a finger on her...you all know what's coming, don't you?"

"Ack... We're sorry, our dear goddess!" the men gushed. "We're not strong enough to save you from the clutches of the Dark Overlord!"

Allen cackled in triumph. At this point, it wasn't clear who was the bad guy. "In any case, we've got more important matters to attend to. Let's hurry on, Eluka, Miach!"

"All right. But which way did Charlotte go?" Eluka asked.

"Ah, I saw her turn left at that corner over there," Miach said.

"What?!" The thugs gasped. Groh turned to Allen in a panic. "This is bad! It's dangerous over there!"

"What do you mean?" asked Allen.

"Those streets are ruled by a powerful adventuring party called the Marionettes. We don't even come close to them... They're unhinged!"

According to Groh, this was an intensely contested area of the city with a number of gangs clashing over their territories every day. The Marionettes were among the most deadly of all of them. There were whispered rumors that they even took on assassination assignments.

"Why did you let her go that way then?!" Eluka screamed.

"Don't blame us! We were all shocked by what she said! Obviously we couldn't take anything else in!" the men clamored.

"Crap," muttered Groh, glaring at the direction Charlotte had gone. "I'll go and bring back our goddess—"

"No, wait," Allen cut in, grabbing Groh's shoulder and slightly shaking his head. "There's no need for that."

"Bro, are you saying what I think you're saying?" Eluka asked, dubious.

"Indeed. Again, it's simple," Allen replied, twisting the corner of his lips into a thin smile. Apparently, the expression triggered some trauma among the thugs around them, and they let out earsplitting shrieks. But he paid no attention to them. If this whole neighborhood was too dangerous for someone like Charlotte to walk through, then there was only one thing he had to do. He raised his fist high in the air and declared, "I'm going to take over this whole district!"

"Are you crazy?!" Groh yelled.

Eluka shook her head and mumbled, "He is supposedly rather smart and competent, and yet..."

"That only makes him harder to deal with," Miach finished, exchanging looks with Eluka.

After that, Allen demonstrated an astounding success across the district. He mounted a surprise attack on the Marionettes' base and

dued with countless puppeteers.

The gang members shouted, “How—?! None of our puppets’ attacks work on this guy!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Allen jeered. “I only need to look at the movement of your fingers to dodge your attacks!”

Next, he confronted another party made up completely of werewolves, the Wolf Studs.

“Here you go, a specially concocted perfume for werewolves!” Allen mocked.

“Grrr...my body’s going limp!” the werewolves cried.

Then he stumbled across a band of elites, the Golden Epitaph, whose members included excellent engineers of enchanted objects.

“Oh! These peeps were nightmare customers—they sent us a crazy long complaint the other day!” Miach exclaimed.

“How dare they! Any enemy of Miach’s is my enemy too!” Eluka shouted.

“No mercy for anyone who threatens a company I’m supporting!” Allen joined in.

“Wh-Who the hell are you people?!” they yelped.

Along the way, they ran into Magus of the Rock People.

“Oh, my Dark Overlord. What brings you here?” Magus asked.

“Good timing, Magus! Help me out a little!” Allen replied.

“But...I have to get to my new part-time job at the flower shop.”

“Hm, you found gainful employment! Then come over as soon as you’re done! And while you’re at it, place a massive order for herbs! I’ll buy from your shop from now on! Tell your boss that I’ll patronize your shop!”

“Uh, thank you for your patronage, I suppose? And what do you want me to help with?”

“I’m launching the final battle over this district to protect Charlotte’s day out no matter what!”

“Huh?”

And so, in a raging torrent of battles, Allen continued to expand his territory.



It was already sunset. Allen stood in a vast field on the outskirts of the city, wiping away the sweat from his forehead.

“Phew... That was good exercise.”

Behind him lay heaps of fallen bodies, all of them adventurers who had been corrupted into criminals. Most had been ruling over the territory where Charlotte was headed. But as the day wore on, the fighters who had heard about Allen’s rise to power and felt threatened by it had joined in the struggle ready to perish, and the whole

kerfuffle had evolved into an all-out war. Nevertheless, Allen had knocked everyone down almost all by himself.

“H-He really did it...” Groh, who had seen everything, was stunned.

Magus, who came to help in the final battle after his shift at the flower shop, cocked his head. “But why does it help the lady’s day out to beat them all up?”

“Well, I’ll fill you in later. For now, I have something else to attend to.” Allen approached three men who were slumped on the ground in one corner. The one with the bad complexion was Wogel, the leader of the Marionettes; the werewolf was Ralph of the Wolf Studs; and the one in silver armor was Dominic of the Golden Epitaph. “Let this be a lesson not to bother other people and live an honest life, working hard as an adventurer.”

“Is it really your place to say that, bro?” Eluka commented.

“I mean, he did make the neighborhood safer, but still...” Miach added. Allen paid them no attention.

The men looked at each other and nodded. “We’ve learned our lesson.”

Allen felt satisfied by their obedient attitude, but was a little startled as they began to weep.

“We’ll mend our ways from now on...in honor of our dear goddess!” they gushed. “Can’t believe someone so kind and good can exist in this world...”

“Sh-She reminded me of my little sister that I left back in my hometown...” another one moaned.

“So Charlotte took care of you too, did she?” Allen asked.

According to them, they had encountered Charlotte after Allen had demolished them—that was no surprise, since Allen had focused his efforts on whichever way Charlotte was walking. When she found the wounded people, she had offered her sympathy and healing potions, and just like Groh, they’d fallen for her on the spot.

All around the field, the men were letting out dreamy murmurs: “I’ve made up my mind now...I’m gonna go legit.” “Maybe it’s time I went back home...” “I miss my mom...” Apparently, Charlotte’s pure innocence had been the most powerful antidote of all for these disreputable men who had been leading lives of such moral decay.

I can see how her kindness would work on them...but even so, isn’t it working too well? Allen was slightly puzzled, but he set aside the question for the time being. He turned to Miach and asked, “So how’s Charlotte doing?”

“My colleagues at Satyrus Delivery Service are doing their very best to support her now,” Miach reported with a salute. Since he had a lot of “cleaning up” to do, he had decided to entrust a third party to

be bodyguards for Charlotte, and Miach had brought in a couple of idle staff. "Oh, speak of the devil," she said.

Out of nowhere, two figures alighted on the field—a pair of canine and vulpine demi-humans wearing the same uniform as Miach. They both greeted Allen with a sharp salute.

"A report for you, sir!" barked the canine messenger. "Our target, the lady, has safely finished her shopping."

"No injuries or problems at all," cooed the vulpine one.

"Right, I'm indebted to you. Here's my thanks for your work," Allen said.

"Woof woof! Thank you veeery much!"

"You're as generous as they say!" The two squealed in delight at the bag full of gold coins.

Though being a stealth bodyguard wasn't really a job for a delivery company, according to Miach, all the employees were happy to do anything in their power...as long as they could turn a good profit. Allen made a mental note that he could ask them to carry out miscellaneous affairs in the future.

"B-By the way," he began, lowering his tone. "There's one thing I want to ask."

"Yes?" The two looked up quizzically.

"What in the world did she buy?" he mumbled. He did think it was a good thing that Charlotte wanted to keep something secret from him. But still, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious. "Ah, if it's something private, you don't have to tell me! I suppose there are various things women need!"

"Well..."

"Umm, it's not really like that..." For some reason, the pair looked at each other with slightly troubled expressions, but it wasn't in distaste or distress. On the contrary, they glanced at Allen warmly, as if they were looking at a couple of playing kittens. Allen could only cock his head in confusion. In the end, they nodded to each other and said simply, "It'd probably be bad manners for us to tell you."

"What does that mean?"

"You'll see, just be patient."

Allen wondered what their suppressed giggle could mean, but before he could question them further, someone called to him from behind.

"Oh, it's you, Allen."

"Whoa!" He jumped and turned around to see Charlotte standing there.

Just as the demi-human girls had reported, she looked no different from when she had set off that morning. Her face broke into a bright smile. "You really were in the city. Everyone said so."

“Everyone?” Allen frowned. Only the thugs themselves knew about his crusade to purge the city for Charlotte’s sake. But he had strictly forbidden them to say anything on the matter. When he glanced around him, he could see some of the men, who had been sprawled over the ground like corpses, rising again and starting to murmur fervidly.

“Look, it’s our dear goddess!”

“How divine she looks...”

“That evil Dark Overlord, how could he deceive our goddess!”

The crowd was buzzing with words of worship and resentment. None of them appeared to have spilled the beans. *Then who was it?* Allen wondered.

“Allen, everyone was talking about you when I walked down the streets,” Charlotte went on, smiling cheerfully. “They were saying things like, ‘the Dark Overlord did it for us,’ and ‘there’s finally going to be peace in this city’...so I wanted to find out what it was about and came here to see.”

“Okay...” Allen was at a loss for words.

“Ah, slipped my mind,” Miach mumbled, gesturing to Allen to come closer. She whispered in his ear, “You’re the talk of town now.”

“How come?”

“Well, whaddaya think? These gangs were giving everyone a real headache, y’see. Now that you pummeled them all at once, the city’s going to have a lot less trouble with rough scoundrels. Everyone’s happy.”

“Hunh. Nice, bro. You didn’t mean to, but you did a good deed,” Eluka praised him, grinning.

“Hmm...” Allen didn’t know how he felt about the situation. Everything he had done, he had done just for Charlotte. *Who knew it would benefit other people? The world works in strange ways.* Besides, he didn’t have much experience with receiving gratitude from a large number of people. He knew that most people completely misunderstood his words and actions, but he had no intention at all of changing his ways. So it felt somewhat ticklish and itchy to be thanked for things he had done in his usual bulldoze style.

While the three of them were having this whispered conversation, Charlotte tilted her head and looked around, puzzled. “What’s happening today? Is everyone gathered here...for a field day, perhaps?”

“Indeed—something like that,” Allen replied nonchalantly. “They asked me to train them.”

The mob jeered in whispers, muttering things like: “As if...” “Looks like he has to be docile to our goddess...” “That’s our goddess right there, taming the Dark Overlord...” Allen’s keen ears still caught

them, however, and he glowered at them.

Unaware, Charlotte smiled timidly and said, “I wonder if field days are a trend of some kind in the city? I saw people with injuries everywhere I went. I ended up using almost all the potion phials you gave me, Allen...I’m sorry.”

“It was a convenient way of getting rid of the stock. It’s cheap stuff, so don’t worry.” In truth, it was a fairly high quality potion that would be worth three silver coins per phial, but he didn’t mention that. “By the way...umm, well, the thing is...” he murmured, averting his eyes.

“Yes?”

He still didn’t know if it was fine for him to ask, but in the end, curiosity won over. “How was your shopping?”

“Of course, it was a big success!” Charlotte answered cheerfully and rummaged in her bag. Apparently, she’d managed to buy what she had had her eyes on. She took out two packages, wrapped in colorful paper with pretty ribbons—they looked exactly like the sort of thing a woman would like. As Allen felt relieved, Eluka and Miach peered over his shoulders.

“Oh, isn’t that from that shop that opened recently? Selling cute little things?” Eluka asked.

“It’s the hottest shop in town right now,” Miach joined in. “So that was the shop ya were after, Charlotte?”

“Uh, um, well... It’s actually...” Charlotte looked at the two girls a little nervously. Eluka, Miach, and Allen exchanged glances at Charlotte’s reaction, but after a few moments, she gulped and thrust the two packages toward them. “Th-These are for you...Eluka and Miach!”

“Huh?!”

“Meow?!”

“Wh-What...did you say?” Allen murmured.

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Eluka and Miach looked at each other and asked Charlotte hesitantly, “Wait...do you mean...the whole reason you came to the city today was to buy presents for us?!”

“But it’s your very first salary...ya sure you want to give it away?” Miach pressed.

“Y-Yes. You’ve been so kind to me, so...” Charlotte nodded eagerly.

The two took the packages and unwrapped them to find adorable gifts inside.

“Ooh! I got a super sweet kitty plushie!” Eluka exclaimed.

“I got a brand new hat! Thankee kindly!” Miach grinned.

Watching their excitement, Charlotte’s face melted into a big smile. Apparently, she had been rather worried about whether they’d

like their presents. "I'm glad you like them," she said.

The three girls giggled in delight. It was a very heartwarming scene. If anyone were to throw cold water on their mood, it would have been the gravest crime. But Allen just couldn't bear it anymore.

"Charlotte!"

"Y-Yes?"

He grasped her shoulders and mumbled in a trembling voice, "Is there...nothing for me?"

"Bro..."

"Dark Lord..."

"Oh, Dark Overlord..."

"You're really something."

Eluka and Miach, and even Magus and Groh eyed him in extreme disappointment. He knew it was childish of him, but he couldn't stop himself.

Charlotte was speechless for a while, then she looked away apologetically. "I did look in different shops for something that you might like, Allen, like enchanted objects and herbs. But I just didn't have a clue what would make a good present..."

"Aw...yeah, those are tough to choose," Eluka nodded sympathetically.

It was true—magic-related items were difficult for a layperson to tell apart. Sometimes, a seemingly ordinary black stone could be an extremely valuable ore. Those kinds of shops wouldn't have made any sense to Charlotte.

But of course, Allen couldn't back down. Still grasping Charlotte's shoulders, he appealed to her pitifully, "I would've been overjoyed to get anything from you! Even if it was a random flower you picked from the side of the street, I would've cried in happiness!"

"What the hell, bro."

"That's a tad over-the-top," Miach added.

"Quiet!" Allen shouted. The two who were jeering from the sidelines had each received a present from Charlotte. In other words, they were his enemies. The fact that they didn't cower at all under his fiercest glare infuriated him even more.

Charlotte looked downcast. "I-I'm sorry... You've been taking such good care of me, but I couldn't think of anything nice..."

"Oh! N-No, I don't mean to blame you at all..." Allen clammed up and drew back his hands in a hurry. He reproached himself for acting in such a childish, selfish way.

But Charlotte took his hand gently. When he looked up in surprise, she smiled meekly. "You're always the one on the giving side... Today I realized that I don't know anything about what you like. So, for the time being..." She rummaged in her bag again, but

what she took out wasn't a present.

"A sewing kit?" he asked.

"Yes. I noticed that the hem of your robe is frayed," she explained, looking down at his feet.

She was right—since Allen had been treating it carelessly for years, the edges of the robe were thoroughly tattered. Thanks to the little "field day" he'd engaged in today, it was even shabbier than before.

Come to think of it, she did say they made her do the sewing back home. It made sense that she would notice the state of his robe.

"May I mend your robe?" asked Charlotte, smiling shyly. "And while I do that...please tell me all about your favorite things—so that next time, I can choose a nice present for you."

"Oh...of course," Allen nodded, too overwhelmed to say anything more. With a rush of excitement, he could tell that spending time with Charlotte like that would be far more precious to him than anything she could give.

Eluka and Miach stood smirking behind him, while the mob around them jeered at Allen. "Why *him*, of all people? Why the Dark Overlord?" "I wanna fall in love too..." "Me too..." It was all exceedingly annoying, but Allen was in a good mood, so he let them off the hook.

In one corner, Groh and Magus were having a discussion that was oddly diligent and mature for adventurers like them.

"Maybe I should get an honest job and find a girlfriend..." Groh muttered.

"I could introduce you to someone. What kind of job do you want?"

"Hm...maybe something related to animals?"

Chapter 7: A Naughty Trip to the Hot Springs

One afternoon, Allen was reading in the living room when Charlotte came up to him.

“Um, I finished the book,” she said timidly.

“Oh?” Allen closed his book and smiled. “That was quick. Done already?”

She nodded, clutching a thick volume to her chest. “Y-Yes. It was very interesting, so I couldn’t stop.”

She had been reading a book about the country they were living in. Its topics ranged from history to culture, the main industries, and famous spots for sightseeing. It was a guide book of sorts, aimed at foreign tourists, so it was written in a simple, straightforward style, but its contents were rather dense. Since Charlotte was born in the Kingdom of Neils and had never set foot outside of its borders until her escape, Allen had suggested this book to her as a way of getting to know the country.

Losing track of time and getting absorbed in a book—it was quite a luxury for the fast pace of modern times. In other words, it was a naughty pleasure. Probably.

But in truth, his main intention was to make Charlotte rest properly. If he left her alone, she would go around the mansion, sweeping and cleaning everything. It wasn’t a bad thing to be diligent, but it wasn’t good to work too hard either. And so, he had given her a book, but he hadn’t expected her to finish it so quickly.

Charlotte opened the tome excitedly. “I also learned about the Athena School of Magic that you and Eluka were talking about. It’s such a big school.”

“Indeed.” Allen looked at the black-and-white photo of the familiar building with a bit of nostalgia.

The Athena School of Magic was a humongous institution. All the students, faculty, and other staff put together would equal the population of a small island nation. Though he had been expelled from it about three years ago, it had still been his home for most of his life. He still felt attached to it to some extent.

Would be nice to see it again after all this time, he thought, then had an idea. He grinned mischievously and turned to Charlotte. “Is the school the place you’re most interested in? Anywhere else catch your

eye?"

"Hmm, there's so many," she said, flipping through the book. "But if I had to pick one...oh!" She paused, then stared at Allen with a frightened kind of look. "If I tell you which place I was drawn to...what's going to happen?"

"Your answer will determine where we'll go for a trip tomorrow."

"I knew it!" she exclaimed. Her face became serious.

Allen shrugged at her strange response. "You're not interested in a long journey? Well, I suppose a woman has to pack a lot of things." Back when he had been living with the Crawfords, he had to go on a family trip with them about once a year. He remembered those trips and laughed. "If you're worried about luggage, I don't mind carrying it at all. Uncle and I used to carry suitcases for my Aunt and Eluka."

"Um, n-no, it's not that..." Charlotte shrank apologetically and mumbled, looking up at him. "You're already letting me live here... It would be too presumptuous of me to ask you to take me on a long trip."

"There's no need to hold back, you know."

"But...I like spending time with you in this mansion, Allen. It's my favorite time." She beamed brightly.

Allen couldn't detect any lies in her words, yet he was slightly dissatisfied.

"Besides," she went on, "naughty things are fun only because you do them once in a while. If we have naughty fun all the time, we'll turn into naughty people."

"Hm...I suppose you've got a point."

It wasn't as if Allen wanted to *corrupt* Charlotte. All he wanted was for her to experience all kinds of pleasures that she had never felt before. They say poverty dulls the wit, but it didn't do one good to be too satiated either. The appreciation of naughty pleasures needed moderation; he wouldn't argue that. But still, he couldn't give up on the idea now. He looked at Charlotte anxiously and asked, "If I take you on a trip...it'll surely make you happy, right? That's what *I* want to see."

"Um...w-well, that is true, but..." she averted her eyes.

It was working. He went on to persuade her even more. "Oh, I'm sure it'd be such a brilliant holiday. We can delight in regional cuisines, or go sightseeing, or have lazy naps at an inn. Ah, hot springs would be nice too."

"H-Hot springs...!" Charlotte straightened up.

The destinations for the Crawfords' family holidays were determined, of course, by the matriarch. Therefore, Allen knew from experience just how much women were attracted to the idea of hot springs. Charlotte's fall was imminent. Allen smirked and lifted her

chin with his hand. "Come now. Tell me where you want to go. Your wish is my command."

"A-Allen..." Her sky blue eyes gazed into his. But she came to herself and drew back. "N-No, I shouldn't! I won't tell you!"

"Mrr, you're rather obstinate... I have no choice then—I'll put a death curse on myself."

"I told you, please don't ever do that again!"

Just as Charlotte spoke, the doorbell rang.

Allen paused his preparation of the curse and cocked his head.

"Tch, just when I'm busy... Sorry, I'll get that. Wait here."

"Th-Thank goodness..." she heaved a big sigh of relief.

If she thought he would back down at this point, she still underestimated him. Allen put that thought aside and headed to the entrance hall. When he opened the front door, the usual mail carrier gave him a crisp salute.

"Hullo hullo, Dark Lord. How are ya?"

"Oh, it's you, Miach. I thought you already delivered our mail earlier this morning?"

"This time, it's a special delivery." She rummaged in her bag and produced a single envelope.

It was simply addressed "For the Dark Overlord." What a slapdash way to address a letter. And what kind of delivery company would find a recipient with this address? On top of that, he didn't recognize the handwriting, so he was doubly puzzled.

"What is it?"

"Heh heh heh. Surprise surprise!" Miach chuckled playfully, then held out the letter to him. "Let me present...a three-day holiday for two!"

"Uh...Okay?"



"Wow..."

The next day, Charlotte was poking her head out the window of the horse-drawn carriage and marveling at the view. Vast meadows stretched out in all directions, and the golden leaves of early summer were dancing in the sunlight. She could see mountain ranges in the distance, and the rush of wind felt tranquil on her face. There wasn't anything unique about the scenery, but she was riveted.

Allen smiled sheepishly at her delight, which exceeded his expectations. "I'm glad you're excited, but is the view that special?"

"Y-Yes. Neils Kingdom is very mountainous...so it's my first time seeing such pretty, open fields," she said, smiling ear to ear. Then she let out a heavy sigh. "When I fled the country, I hid inside a carriage transporting some goods...but back then I was too scared to enjoy the

view.”

“I-I see...” He regretted the turn in the conversation and tried to cheer her up. “Well, this region is deep in the countryside. I confirmed that the news about you and your wanted poster haven’t been circulated here. So you can relax and go around wherever you like.”

“It’s like a dream, going out without having to wear a disguise,” she laughed.

Relieved to see her happy, Allen looked out the window with her. A gentle breeze caressed his cheeks. The air felt fresh and pleasant. “Well...it’s not too bad,” he murmured, smiling.

“Hee hee. I told you,” she giggled.

They gazed out at the landscape for a little while in comfortable silence. Peaceful moments slipped by, accompanied only by the sounds of the wind, the horses, and the carriage.

They were in a region called Yunoha, located northeast of Allen’s mansion, about three hours away by horse-drawn carriage. They were on their way to a three-day hot springs holiday here.

Allen smiled in secret. *Hats off to the townsfolk for giving us such a charming present. I never would’ve expected them to treat us to a getaway.*

Only a few days prior, Allen had strong-armed control of the Maerd District—a seedy neighborhood in the city—in order to protect Charlotte on her day out. The area had been crawling with adventurers-turned-thugs, a constant source of worry for the city’s ordinary residents. But thanks to Allen, nearly all the gang members had been forced to mend their ways. Now, they were working hard as honest adventurers, as well as proactively participating in voluntary service for the area, such as picking up garbage from the streets. It seemed Allen’s subsequent trips to the city to bully them had paid off.

As a result, he had contributed to making peace in the city, and the mutual aid society—consisting of shop owners and other townsfolk—decided to send him a gift to praise his achievement. In other words, this holiday was completely free. Even Charlotte, who had at first been reluctant to go on a trip, had no reason to protest against a free one.

But now she frowned anxiously. “Was it really okay for me to come with you? Maybe it would’ve been better to invite Eluka?”

“No, she has some errands to run,” he replied honestly. Eluka had said she was going to be away for several days. Most likely, she would be looking into the current state of Neils Kingdom, as Allen had asked her to. Even if she had been free, though, Allen would have certainly invited Charlotte. *Imagine, grown-up siblings going on a holiday by themselves. There was bound to be bloody fights erupting every hour.* “Anyway, look, we’re getting closer. That’s where we’ll be staying.”

“Oh!”

The scenery had changed a little as they chatted. Up ahead, the fields came to an end, making way for a wide-open view of the big, blue sea. A cliff jutted over one part of the beach, and on top of it rose a magnificent building. The pastel cream-colored structure, surrounded by palm trees, was currently the most popular resort hotel in the Yunoha Region.

This region was historically famous for hot springs, and there were numerous hotels and inns for tourists. The hotel where Allen and Charlotte would be staying was a shiny new five-star hotel. In addition to the hot springs, they also had a wide range of facilities and services, from an excellent restaurant to a massage spa. Many people enjoyed their stays so much that they returned again and again.

All of this information came from Miach, of course. "I spoke to the peeps in the mutual aid society and helped them choose a package that's perfect for you two. So hope ya enjoy it!" Miach had even told him that she didn't want any souvenirs; she only wanted to hear how their holiday went when they returned.

They were steadily approaching the building. Charlotte realized something and pulled out the big guide book she'd read. "Look, Allen. The hotel, it's in this book too!"

"Hmm? Ah, you're right." It wasn't just *in* the book—it covered an entire two-page spread. As he was stroking his chin, looking forward to what they might find there, he wondered something. "By the way, could it be this hotel that you wanted to go to?"

"Oh...um...yes!"

"You're lying."

"Eep...wow, Allen, you really can detect lies..." Charlotte shrank like a scolded child.

Allen thought anyone could've seen through her lie—she had hesitated quite visibly, looked away, and answered in a quivering voice. He even wondered whether he should help her become more worldly.

He took the book from her and flipped through the pages. "Hmm, so it's not here...then how about this hotel on a remote island? No, wait. A woman might prefer this one—"

"P-Please don't guess anymore!" She snatched away the book from him, her face turning bright red. "I'm sure I'll enjoy the hot springs here too! So please just forget where I wanted to go! I-It's too embarrassing..."

"Embarrassing?" Allen tilted his head. "Why would it be embarrassing if I knew where you wanted to go?"

"B-Because..." She squeezed the book against her chest and mumbled in a thin, feeble voice, "I-It's the kind of place a little child would like..."

“Hmm? I see.” That was a big hint. He almost started listing the possible spots, but he stopped himself and shrugged. “All right, if you really don’t want to tell me, I won’t pry. But I’ll just say one thing.”

“Y-Yes?” She looked back at him with round, curious eyes.

“Doing something you couldn’t as a child, and enjoying it to the fullest has a charm of its own, you know. That’s another naughty pleasure.”

“Did you also have things you couldn’t do when you were little?”

“Oh yes,” he nodded wholeheartedly. He contemplated his childhood. Most of the time, he had done anything he wanted. Still, there were a number of things that had been difficult to do as a child, but that he accomplished later as an adult. “For example, I wanted to go to a cave several thousand meters underground to dig up magical ores, and cast a large-scale explosive spell in the middle of some hinterland where no one lived... Uncle forbade me to do all that when I was little. It was a special experience to make that happen when I was older.”

Charlotte squeezed out an appropriate reply. “I-I think we might have different things in mind, but...it sounds fun!”

“Well, in any case, do you think I’d laugh at you if you told me where you wanted to go?”

“No...”

“See? So you can tell me whenever you feel like it. I’d be glad to come along wherever you want to go.”

“Okay!” Charlotte smiled like a blossoming flower.

She probably never had much of a childhood to begin with. It was a valuable exercise to feel like a child again and make up for the lost time. *Hm...becoming a child again...that’s not a bad idea.* There were plenty of naughty pleasures he could still teach her after they returned from their hot springs holiday.



Soon, they reached the hotel. The moment they stepped into the lobby, a concierge greeted them with a deep bow. “Welcome to the Yunoha Resort! We’re very pleased to have you here!”

The concierge was a mermaid with a coral ornament on her hair. She wore a crisp suit jacket and shirt, the very picture of a well-dressed employee. She deftly hopped around on her tail fin and carried their luggage for them. When Allen handed her the ticket that Miach had given them, she brightened up even more.

“Welcome, Mr. Crawford, your reserved room is ready for you. Shall we show you to your room now?”

“Sounds good. Are the hot springs open already too?”

“Of course. It’s nice and quiet there this time of day.”

“Hm. Then maybe we could go bathe first—”

Charlotte nodded eagerly. “Y-Yes please! If that’s what you’d like, Allen!” Apparently, she really had been looking forward to the hot springs.

The mermaid smiled warmly at her. “Well then, let me escort you to the main bathing area. Please follow me.”

“Thanks,” Allen said.

“Th-Thank you very much,” Charlotte joined in.

“It’s our pleasure, I assure you.” The mermaid pressed a hand to her cheek and sighed with a blush. For some reason, she gazed adoringly at Allen and Charlotte, and said, “It’s such an honor that you chose our hotel for your honeymoon!”

“Honey—”

“—moon?”

The pair froze at the unexpected word.

“Oh?” The mermaid tilted her head. “Could it be that you’re not married?”

“Unfortunately...not,” Allen croaked.

“Ah, you’re a fresh couple then!”

Though his tongue felt numb, he managed to answer, “Uh...not quite that either.” Charlotte was rooted to the spot, her face completely red. It was up to him to deal with the situation. “Could you enlighten me as to what made you think so?”

“Well, it’s just that...” Puzzled, the mermaid held up their ticket and showed it to him. “This is a ticket for a special holiday package only for couples, you see.”

“That sneaky Miach... It was a plot,” Allen grumbled to himself. He recalled her saying she’d chosen a perfect plan for the two of them. Come to think of it, she did look strangely perky when she’d said that.

The mermaid looked at them quizzically and explained, “If you’d like to, it’s possible to change it to another plan...but this one is the most luxurious course, so we’d recommend staying with it.”

“Fine...” Allen gulped loudly and announced his decision. “We’ll go ahead with the...couples-only plan.”

“Duly noted, sir! This way please!”

Charlotte was still stunned and mumbling, “C-Couple... Married...?” Allen took her hand and followed the eager mermaid.

Their room was a comfortable corner one that looked out on the ocean. After dropping off their bags, the mermaid guided them to the hot springs area. As they walked, Charlotte and Allen didn’t talk much, and they felt somewhat awkward.

Even Allen couldn’t act his usual self under the circumstances. A *couple...or a married couple...huh*. He didn’t know what to think about such flights of fancy.

They were still feeling bewildered when the mermaid announced, “Here we are!” The hot springs area was situated at the back of the hotel, and guests from all walks of life were coming in and out of the large entrance. The mermaid turned to them with a cheerful smile. “This is where you can enjoy the pride of our hotel! Each bath draws water from natural hot springs, and the open-air bath is our most popular. You can see a whole view of the ocean while relaxing in the bath.”

“Hm, that sounds nice.” It seemed they weren’t featured in a guide book for nothing. The sooner he could soak in the bath and gaze at the sea, the sooner he could quell this restless, tingling sensation inside him. At least, that’s what he’d hoped, but his aspirations were swiftly dashed on the rocks of the mermaid’s next question.

“If I may, do you both have your bathing suits ready?”

“B-Bathing suit? Why would I need that?” Allen replied.

“Naturally...” the mermaid beamed and gestured to the hot springs entrance. “This whole bathing area is unisex, so everyone wears bathing suits!”

“*What?! “Really?!”* The pair yelped perfectly in unison.



Half an hour later, Allen stood in his rented swimming trunks, staring absentmindedly at the bathing pools. “Can’t believe it...”

The hotel’s hot springs area was indeed very spacious. Underneath the enormous domed ceiling, a variety of pools lined the room. In addition to the main pools, there were also saunas, massage rooms, juice stands, a pool with a slide, and even a magma bath just for the Rock People. It was like a big amusement park.

Though the mermaid concierge had told them that it was a quiet time of day for bathing, there was still a fair amount of bustle. All kinds of guests were enjoying the hot springs in their bathing suits, regardless of species, age, or gender.

True, it made sense that people could enjoy the expansive hall more freely this integrated way, instead of separating the baths into men’s and women’s. This had the added perk of allowing families to bathe all together too.

Even so, Allen could only hold his head in his hands and sigh, “But, seriously...a bathing suit...really?” They say when in Rome, do as the Romans do, but he was still troubled.

When she had discovered that they hadn’t brought any swimming suits, the mermaid had told them, “Well then, I’ll take the lady to our rental stall—we have lots of cute swimming suits to choose from, so please feel free to take your time!”

“Uh, um...really?!” Charlotte cried out as she was guided to the

changing room.

Allen could only look on, dazed. “Oh, right. Yeah, take your time.”

Since then, the words “bathing suit” had been swirling around his head. There were many guests in swimming suits right in front of him, including young women, who were caressing their own fresh skin in the bath. But the sight didn’t affect him at all. The mere thought of Charlotte in a bathing suit made his heart race far more than the women he could already see.

What would happen to him if he actually saw her for real? In all honesty, he didn’t know the answer. *Right. If I need to, I’ll stop my heart. I’ll stop it over and over again.* By blithely choosing to kill himself off, Allen tried to stay calm. Then he heard her timid voice behind him.

“Umm...I’m sorry to make you wait.”

Allen almost jumped, but with an iron will, he stood still. After taking a deep breath, he turned around slowly—just fast enough not to seem unnatural—reminding himself to plaster a cool, casual smile on his own face. He braced himself for the blow in every way possible.

“Don’t worry, I just got...here...too...” Allen lost his ability to speak.

“A-Allen?” Charlotte tilted her head anxiously, but he was paralyzed.

She was wearing a bikini with a flowery pattern, a halter type with straps tied behind the neck. It was a relatively modest style, though—the top was covered in frills, and a long pareu was wrapped around her hips.



But that wasn't enough to put Allen at ease. It was the kind of outfit that clearly accentuated the natural shapeliness of her figure. With a bikini, her midriff was visible, of course, and the bit of her bare legs peeking out from the slit of the pareo were just as radiant.

It wasn't just the light reflecting off the water; Charlotte in a swimming suit was positively dazzling. There was no need for Allen to stop his own heart. Why? Because it stopped of its own accord.

Unsure what to make of Allen's silence, Charlotte looked down sadly. "I-I knew it... This kind of outfit...really isn't for me...is it?"

"Uh...th-that's not true," Allen somehow managed to shake his head, and squeezed out the words he should have said. "It looks...really good on you."

"D-Do you think so?" Charlotte brightened up. But she realized something and looked away immediately. Allen wondered at her odd reaction, but he noticed that she was blushing. In a soft, tiny voice, she murmured, "Y-You look nice too...Allen."

"Ah. Right, I see. We're in the same boat."

"What's that?"

"No, never mind. Anyway, let's go." Though Charlotte was still shy, Allen took her hand and started toward the baths. He would have to get used to the bathing suit in time. For now, the crucial thing was to let Charlotte have fun. Of course, he already had a plan for that. "Come on, let's do the naughty things we can only enjoy at the hot springs," he said.

First, they headed to the open-air bath that the mermaid had recommended as their most popular spot. When they opened the door and stepped outside, they were greeted by brilliant light.

"Wow!" Charlotte cried out.

On the other side of the door, they were surrounded by a cavern with a rocky surface like limestone. Apparently, they had hollowed out part of the cliff right underneath the hotel, and straight ahead of them lay a wide expanse of ocean. And right on the edge of the open cave, just before the ocean, there was a large open-air bath. Milky steam rose from the hot water, and a slight scent of sulfur wafted in the air. Thanks to the shape of the cave, they could sit back in the bath and enjoy the view without getting scorched by direct sunlight. On top of that, the unique setting heightened the feeling that they were on an adventure far removed from the scenes of daily life.

"This is amazing!"

"Indeed. No wonder it's so popular," Allen nodded in honest agreement.

After a quick shower, they both stepped in the pool together. The temperature was just perfect—not too hot, not lukewarm. The silky,

mellow water enveloped their whole bodies.

“Woww...it feels so lovely,” sighed Charlotte.

“It really does...”

For a little while, they simply gazed at the ocean and enjoyed the feel of the hot water. The other guests were doing the same—soft voices came and went, here and there, but for the most part, only the murmuring of the waves echoed gently in the cave. Sometimes the cries of seabirds reached them too, as the time passed peacefully.

“I wish we could stay here like this...always,” Charlotte murmured happily, her face flushed.

“Me too.”

“But...if we soak too long, we’ll get dizzy. That would be a bit too bad.”

“Hmph, you still have a lot to learn. This isn’t the only way to revel in hot springs, you know,” Allen smirked.

“Oh?”

Just then, the mermaid concierge appeared breezily, holding aloft a tray. “Here you are; I’ve brought your order for you!”

“Perfect timing. Much obliged,” Allen replied, taking two glass cups of ice cream from her. It was a pearly white vanilla with a red cherry on top.

Charlotte brightened up when he handed her a cup. “Ice cream in a hot spring! Wh-What a luxury...!”

“That’s not all. *Immortal Ice*.” Allen snapped his fingers, and the glass cup started to glow with a bluish white light. Even when touched by steam, the ice cream didn’t melt at all, maintaining the perfect level of crispy iciness on the surface. “Now it won’t melt from the hot bath. You can take your time savoring it.”

“Th-Thank you so much!” Charlotte scooped a tiny bit of the ice cream and popped it into her mouth. Her face instantly softened into a blissful smile.

Allen watched, impressed by how she managed to make it look so delicious. The other guests’ eyes were drawn to her. Apparently, they were thinking the same thing. They exchanged glances and gulped.

“Daddy, Daddy! I wanna have that ice cream too!” said a boy.

“Oh, all right. Don’t tell Mommy when she gets back from her spa treatment, okay?”

The mermaid was quickly overwhelmed by all the requests. “Ooh, please get in a line, everybody—I’ll take your orders one by one!”

An elderly guest approached Allen and asked, “Hey, young man. Would you mind putting that spell on our ice cream too?”

“Of course, that’s easy!” Allen readily accepted. He was in a good mood, after all.

And so, a huge ice cream craze descended on the open-air bath.

That night, Charlotte and Allen were having dinner at the resort's restaurant. The mermaid concierge came over expressly to thank them. "We are so grateful! We really can't thank you enough."

"Not at all, don't mention it," Allen replied.

She was evidently one of the managerial staff of the hotel. She clasped her hands together as if in prayer and looked at them with sparkling eyes. "Thanks to you, sir, we sold three times more ice cream than usual! And you even taught our staff how to cast that spell to keep it from melting... I truly can't thank you enough!"

"It's really not a big deal... I haven't done anything worth mentioning." Allen shook his head with a sheepish smile.

Charlotte swallowed her bite of steak, and her face broke into a sweet smile. "Everyone was so happy, though. You're a wonderful wizard, Allen."

"Not you too... All I did was keep ice cream from melting." But still, she was right—everyone at the bath had been all smiles after that. Even though it was such a simple spell, its effect was excellent. He'd only intended to make Charlotte happy, but he received many words of thanks from everyone around them, just like with the incident in the city. *Hmm...strange things do happen...* In any case, his mission of making Charlotte happy had turned out to be a success, so he was extremely pleased about that.

The mermaid concierge, however, was adamant on doing something to thank him. She sparkled at Allen, hands still clasped together, and entreated, "Please, let us show our gratitude somehow. Do you already have plans for sightseeing tomorrow? If you'd like, we would be more than happy to offer our services in any way possible!"

"Thanks for the offer...but I don't have any particular plans in mind."

"Me neither...I only thought about enjoying the hot springs..." Charlotte chimed in.

While Allen and Charlotte looked at each other, the mermaid eagerly rubbed her hands together. "There are countless popular sightseeing spots around here, so you're very welcome to tell us about your interests, and we'll draw up the perfect itinerary for you."

"Hm. Can you tell us what kind of attractions there are?" Allen asked.

"Let me see, there are spots for diving, relaxing beaches... Also, some hills where you can sometimes see Fenrirs."

The first two items on her list were typical features of seaside resorts, so they didn't pique his curiosity, but the last one was different. "Really? Can you find Fenrirs in these parts?" said Allen,

slightly wide-eyed.

Fenrirs were magical wolves that ranked near the top of the hierarchy of magical beasts. They were proud creatures that eschewed battle. Since they rarely appeared before humans, it was said that one look at a Fenrir would bring fortune. Allen had only seen the beast once or twice in his life.

But the mermaid smiled apologetically. “Unfortunately, it would likely be a waste of time to try to see them now. They’re busy rearing their young at this time of year, so they hardly ever come down from the mountains.”

“I see...bad timing.”

“But if you’re interested in magical beasts, there’s a spot we’d recommend even more,” she added with a hopeful twinkle in her eyes. “None other than the Yunoha Zoo of Magical Beasts!”

“!!!”

“Hmm.”

Allen didn’t miss the gleam that flashed in Charlotte’s eyes at the sound of the place.

The next day, they had bright weather for their sightseeing adventure. Friendly rays of sunlight poured over the land, making it perfect for a day out.

“Well then, we shall come to pick you up at sunset,” said the mermaid concierge with a wave, as she maneuvered the horse-drawn carriage to return to the hotel after dropping them off. Though the bottom half of her body was that of a fish, she was capable of anything—a true professional.

“Thank you,” replied Allen. As he watched her go, he stroked his chin and grinned. “I see. So *this* is where you wanted to go.”

“Uh, umm...” Charlotte looked down, turning bright red. Still, she kept glancing at the entrance in front of them, and she seemed half excited, half embarrassed. There was a twinkle in her eyes too.

Before them stood the big, colorful gate to the Yunoha Zoo of Magical Beasts. As the name suggested, it was a theme park that kept all kinds of magical beasts. Among the various similar institutions around the world, this one was a rather large-scale establishment. In its actual operation, it was more like a research facility, but much of it was open to the public, so it was a popular place that attracted many people from in and outside the country. The creatures in their care included rare species, such as the Ancient Dragon, which had the most impressive longevity among dragon species, and the Phoenix. Allen had heard about the place years ago.

Allen opened up the zoo’s pamphlet, chock-full of information, and examined the map. “Looks like the entire day might be just enough to see all of it,” he noted. “Well, we can take it slow

regardless.”

“B-But...is it really okay?” Charlotte asked apologetically. “I feel sorry to make you indulge my whims.”

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing I want to see in particular. This kind of trip is a nice change for me,” Allen laughed warmly. “But I’m curious—do you like magical beasts so much? I never knew that.”

“N-Not magical beasts in general... I was just intrigued by the ‘petting zoo’ that I saw in the guide book...”

He found the petting zoo on the map. “Ah, I see. It’s right here.” It was a space where tame magical beasts were kept loose, and visitors were free to feed, pet, and play with them. Allen thought it made perfect sense that she would be attracted to it, but Charlotte only grew more and more abashed.

“Um...I’m sorry I’m so childish...”

“What do you mean? Look over there,” he said, patting her shoulder and pointing at the entrance to the zoo.

“Huh?” Her jaw dropped when she saw all kinds of visitors—families with small children, young people, elderly tour groups, and so on—going in. “I-It’s not only for kids?”

“As you can see, age doesn’t matter at a zoo. So no need to feel embarrassed about anything.”

Stunned, Charlotte stared at the lines of people going into the gate. “I had no idea...”

Allen watched her. “Is it your first time coming to a place like this?” he asked.

“Yes... I’ve only read about it in a picture book.” When she was still living with her mother, she was given a hand-me-down picture book from a neighboring family. She read it over and over again until it became dog-eared. She loved seeing the characters in the book—many children wearing animal-shaped hats and playing with animals. “I always wanted to go to a zoo...someday.” As she told him about her memories, she gazed dreamily at the entrance gate. She looked like a little child who had been left behind, all by herself. Allen felt a lump in his throat.

Without showing any of his melancholy emotions, he laughed triumphantly. “All right then, we really must enjoy everything to the fullest today. Imagine we’re kids again!”

“Y-Yes!” she answered brightly.

Allen led her through the gate. *Now that I’ve heard the story behind it...I simply must do anything I can to let her have fun.* He swore to himself to indulge Charlotte as much as he possibly could and do everything in his power to help her regain her lost childhood.

“Oh!” The moment they stepped into the zoo, Charlotte stopped in her tracks.

When Allen followed her gaze, he saw a stall selling headbands with different kinds of animal ears. Of course, a tourist spot had to have something like this. Children and couples were flocking to the stall, and there was a special jovial air around it.

Allen chuckled. "Want one?"

"Oh, um, but..."

"No holding back today. Go on, pick any color you like." He led her to the stall and encouraged her to choose one. At first, she was hesitant, but soon she was browsing the different styles with shining eyes. The melancholy expression that had appeared on her face before entering the zoo was gone without a trace, which satisfied Allen to no end.

Eventually, she settled on her choice. "Uh, um...I'd like these, please!"

"Sure—wait. Why do you have two?"

Charlotte was holding one headband with light brown cat ears and another one with white cat ears mottled with black. Timidly, she looked up at him and murmured, "Would...would you like to put it on with me?"

Silence. Allen couldn't find any words in response.

"Ah, I guess you wouldn't like something so childish, Allen," she blurted out, dejected. "I'm sorry..."

"Why would I not like it?!" He turned to the seller and recklessly handed over two silver coins. "We'll take these two!" Now that he'd come this far, he didn't care what happened anymore.

Thus the pair began their day at the zoo with silly cat ears on their heads. Of course, the white one with black spots was Allen's, and the light brown was Charlotte's.

Charlotte stared at Allen's head with twinkling eyes. "Aww... I-It looks lovely on you! So cute, Allen!"

"Uh, really..." He thought it looked far better on Charlotte, but he couldn't quite get the words out. And if his smile was tense and twitchy, he couldn't help it. *If anyone I know sees me...erasure is the only answer.* Whether to erase their memory or their life was a question he would have to answer on the spot.

Complete with cat ears, they headed to the petting zoo. It was a flat lawn surrounded by a fence, and a variety of beasts were hopping around, including Vorpall Bunnies, about as big as an adult human, that had been crossbred into tame creatures; the two-headed canine breed called Orthrus, which were known to have a courteous personality and were owned by some wealthy people as guard dogs; and the Infernal Capybara that could raze a whole mountain to rubble if they got too hungry, but was gentle as long as they had food to eat. All across the lawn, there were magical beasts nibbling on food that

visitors held out to them, lying belly-up on the ground, and frolicking about. Though several staff were watching closely to prevent any accidents, it was a rather carefree scene.

"They look like they don't have a care in the world," Allen chuckled. "So, what do you think, Charlotte? Charlotte?"

There was no answer from Charlotte. He glanced around and was stunned to see her rooted to the spot, trembling all over, and looking at the petting zoo with eyes brimming with tears of exaltation.

"H-Hey, what's up? Are you okay?"

"J-Just look! Th-They're just so...so fluffy, and furry, and chubby!" she blubbered. Evidently, her vocabulary had taken a severe hit. She burst out sobbing and turned to exalt Allen. "I-I'm so glad I'm alive! Thank you so, so much, Allen... I can't believe I'm lucky enough to see such a paradise... I have no regrets now!"

Allen was confused, but he held out a handkerchief for her. "Uh, we haven't even gone in yet..." He had seen her cry a few times before, but this time it seemed a little peculiar. *Is this really that amazing? I mean...they're just some hairy beasts...* For Allen, they were merely beasts on a lawn. But in Charlotte's eyes, the scene seemed to transform into a kind of heaven on earth. Careful not to provoke her, he gently guided her to the entrance. "Well, anyway, let's go in."

"Y-Yes! I'll devote myself to enjoying their fluffiness..." She gulped, and with a determined look, she approached the nearest beast. Her steps were resolute, as if she was a brave warrior going into battle.

Allen suppressed a laugh. *If she's so enamored with them...I'll give her a hand.* He crept away from her and whispered to a nearby Vorpall Bunny, "Hey, do you have a moment?"

"Whoa, you scared me. You can talk like us?"

"Just a little." Allen had a passing knowledge of the language of magical beasts. He wouldn't be able to communicate with the higher beasts, like the Fenrir, but it was easy to talk to lower-level beasts like the Vorpall Bunnies. Curious to see a human visitor who could speak their language, more Vorpall Bunnies gathered around him.

"What do you want from us?" they asked.

"To tell you the truth, my friend's taken a great liking to you. Would you mind going to play with her? In return, I'll buy the whole stock of your favorite food for you."

"Yippee!" the fluffle of bunnies squealed in delight. "Deal, we'll do it!"

Having successfully bribed the beasts, Allen eagerly turned around and called out, "Hey, Charlotte, come over here—" but froze when he saw the bizarre scene unfolding before his eyes.

"Tee hee hee...you're all so soft and fluffy..." Charlotte sat with a

melty, euphoric expression on her face, surrounded by a flock of animals. A dozen beasts or more waited on her—not just the gentlest ones, but even the cautious Orthrus was letting her rub its belly like a happy puppy.

“Capy!” an Infernal Capybara squeaked, solemnly offering an apple to Charlotte, despite their reputation to be fiercely protective of their food. The Infernal Capybaras were known to fight each other to the death over a single fish, whether the opponent was a parent or a sibling—but now, one of them was willingly sharing their food with Charlotte. It was like a ritual in honor of the monarch of all beasts.

“Ooh! I dunno why, but she looks sweet!”

“Me next! Me next! I wanna get petted too!”

Even the Vorpal Bunnies that should’ve been under Allen’s influence hopped over to Charlotte with genuine interest.

The other visitors also noticed what was happening. Allen overheard them muttering in amazement.

“Wow, look! She’s so popular!”

“She must be a famous beast tamer...”

“Ooh, I should’ve brought my camera.”

Allen could only look on in astonishment. He stroked his chin thoughtfully, staring at the scene. “Surely not. Could it be that she’s...?”



About an hour later, Charlotte and Allen were sitting on the bench near the petting zoo.

“It was really, truly...wonderful!”

“Hm. Glad to hear it.”

Charlotte’s face was glowing, perhaps from all the fluffy snuggles she’d enjoyed. Her smile was even more radiant than usual, and she seemed utterly content. The magical beasts squeaked and squealed and barked at them from the other side of the fence.

“Hee hee, we’ve become such good friends now,” Charlotte giggled, waving at the creatures.

“Uh, y-yeah. Seems like it...”

At first glance, it was a heartwarming view, but Allen, who understood their language, could only watch with a stony expression. A rough translation of their cries included:

“We miss you! Come play with us! Give us more pats, pretty please?”

“Hey, you! Human next to her! If you lay a finger on our lady, we’ll tear you apart with our fangs!”

“Under our Code of the Infernal Capybara, we vow to serve you, our dear Lady...”

They had turned into a pack of manic fans, expressing their

adoration for Charlotte. Though these beasts were used to having humans around, this was indeed a little bizarre. Watching the creatures, Allen said to Charlotte, "There's something I want to ask you."

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

"Has any magical beast ever taken a liking to you before?"

"Oh?" Charlotte was surprised. "I've never been near one in my life."

"I see. You didn't have an opportunity before... Or perhaps because you lived under oppression, you couldn't wield your powers fully."

"What is this about?"

"Well, it's time for a quick lecture." Allen switched to his old teaching mode with a shrug. "There are many kinds of magic and special abilities in this world. Some of them require inborn talent." For example, there was the gift of the sword to cut through all kinds of things; the gift of alchemy to generate unknown materials from universal ones; and Allen himself had the gift of magic, which enabled him to use the advanced technique of effortlessly casting nonverbal spells. As for Charlotte... "You might have the gift of the magical beast tamer."

"B-Beast tamer?"

A beast tamer had the power to communicate and form emotional bonds with magical beasts, as well as have a command over them. Since Charlotte had bewitched all those magical beasts without any training at all, there was certainly potential that she had natural talent.

Charlotte looked down at her palms in a daze. "Could I really...have a gift like that?"

"Yes. And it seems you have considerable talent as well." While Allen could only communicate with lower-level magical beasts, gifted tamers could take full control of high-level beasts like Fenrirs, and even turn them into devoted servants. *I wonder if this same power makes those thugs in the city adore her too?* There were hardly any precedents of this power working on other humans in addition to beasts. If only her impressive power had been effective when she lived in the duke's household, her life might have been kinder to her. He gazed at Charlotte with mixed feelings.

"Excuse me!" Two zookeepers were running toward them. Their clothes were covered in dirt, and they looked pallid. There was clearly something wrong. One of them spoke breathlessly, "A-Are you the visitors who were like a beast magnet in the petting zoo? Are you famous beast tamers, by any chance?"

"Well, I know a bit of magic, but—something wrong?" Allen

frowned.

“Please help us!” she cried, grabbing Allen’s hand. “We’re powerless to save her!”

“Hm?”



The two of them were ushered into one of the research buildings in the zoo. The zookeepers led them deeper and deeper, ignoring the “staff only” signs. Eventually, they arrived at a spacious room.

“We brought the sorcerers!” the zookeepers announced.

“Ah, well done!” Shouts of relief rose around the room.

They were apparently in some kind of laboratory, equipped with rows of dried herbs and tools for preparing medicinal blends. Many zookeepers were gathered there, dressed in similar uniforms as the ones who’d brought Charlotte and Allen.

A man in his early sixties and wearing a white lab coat stepped toward Allen hesitantly. “He looks rather young. Is he really—hm?” He furrowed his brows and stared hard at Allen. “Are you...the son of the Crawford family, by any chance?”

“Indeed I am... Have we met?”

“I attended one of your public lectures at the Athena School of Magic. Now I see. We’re in safe hands with a Crawford among us!” His weary face, with deep circles under his eyes, broke into a smile, and he held out his hand. “I am the director of this zoo. Could you please give us your assistance?”

“I wouldn’t mind...but what in the world happened?”

“It’s...probably faster if we show you.”

With a grave expression, the director led Allen and Charlotte to the back of the laboratory. Past the crowd of people and clutter of equipment, there was a gigantic cage.

“Wha—?!” Allen gasped.

Inside the cage, there was an enormous wolf. It had a glowing coat of silver fur, and its deep crimson eyes glinted with a fierce sense of will. It was one of the rarest species of magical beasts: the Fenrir. A full-grown Fenrir could be as large as a house, but this one was about the height of a human adult. The fur was smeared with blackish red stains, and its low growling didn’t have much strength behind it.

Charlotte asked in a trembling voice, “Is it hurt?”

“Yes...” The director shook his head mournfully. “She seems to have strayed from her parent, and a poacher got to her.”

The Fenrir was an endangered species, and hunting them was rarely permitted, unless there was a very good reason for doing so. Even wounding them without proper cause would land a hunter in prison. But since their fur and bones made excellent materials for

enchanted objects, it was difficult to eradicate poachers. At the Zoo of Magical Beasts, they often rescued such rare species, and attempted to breed them and release them back in the wild.

"It's the first time we've rescued a Fenrir, and our staff are having trouble communicating with her... We can't even treat her wounds."

"That's a problem indeed..." Allen frowned and slowly approached the cage. He tried to speak in the language of magical beasts like he did with the Vorpall Bunnies. *"Hey, can you understand me? We're not your enemy—"*

"Grawr!" the Fenrir raged, completely ignoring him. She glared at Allen with ferocious animosity.

High-level magical beasts rarely listened to humans. For them, humans were as trivial as blobs of slime. In order to communicate with them properly, one would need either to be an expert beast tamer, or to try to build a relationship of trust over time. At this rate, the Fenrir wouldn't let anyone near enough for them to cast a healing spell on her. On top of that, if they got too close and provoked her, the wounds might open up and deepen even more.

Allen clicked his tongue at his own powerlessness and slowly backed off. "Tch... I can't get through to her at all."

"She's been like this ever since we rescued her, and she won't even eat," the director sighed. "If we wait till she's more at ease with us, I'm afraid she might not make it..."

"Hm. There are no beast tamers among your staff?"

"When it comes to a Fenrir, our staff aren't at a high enough skill level... We tried contacting other zoos as well, but haven't had much luck."

While the director and Allen were in discussion, Charlotte was gazing at the cage from a distance, fingers clasped together in front of her chest. "Poor Fenrir..."

Seeing her like that made Allen want to help even more. Somehow, fate had brought them into this predicament. He turned to the director again. "Well, I'll do whatever I can to help—"

"There's an emergency!" Thundering footsteps echoed in the hallway, and a breathless staff burst into the room. "A Fenrir is approaching the zoo! It's probably the pup's mother!"

"What?!" There was a sudden commotion in the crowd.

"That's impossible!" The director pressed the staff, color draining from his face, "We erased our scent after we rescued this one, and we used an anti-detection spell! How did she track us?!"

"We can only assume that her powers of magic far surpass ours..." one of the staff replied.

"It's true, she has dwelled in this land for more than a century, but still... It seems we underestimated her." The director and the staff

looked down in shame.

What made the Fenrir so legendary was not just their rarity, but the pure enormity of their strength. For a Fenrir over a century old, it wouldn't take much effort to demolish an entire city by itself. And now, a Fenrir of that caliber was closing in on the Zoo as they spoke. They were undeniably in a crisis.

Even Allen felt cold sweat as he groaned, "To her, it must look like you've kidnapped her child... Is it possible to return the child to her in peace?"

"We haven't been able to heal her yet, and it's dangerous to let her outside. Besides, what would the mother think if she saw her wounded child?"

"I suppose it'd only add fuel to the fire..." Allen let out a heavy sigh. There was only one option left. He flexed his arm a little and declared, "Fine. I'll go and ward off the mother."

"But...even for a Crawford wizard, that's far too reckless!" the director warned.

"Oh, I'm used to being reckless. Leave it to me. But you should evacuate all the visitors, just to be safe."

"If...if you're sure... We're indebted to you!"

"All right, Charlotte, you go take shelter with the others too—"

"But Allen!" Charlotte cut him off, looking straight into his eyes. In her blue eyes burned a willpower stronger than ever before. "You said I might have the gift of a beast tamer."

"Well, yes, I did say that..." Allen's brow creased when he realized what she was getting at. He shook his head deliberately. "Don't try it. It's too risky."

She didn't budge. "But I can't just stand around doing nothing... I can't bear it." She bowed deeply and pleaded with him in a quivering voice. "Please. I'll run away if I sense any danger. Let me try talking to the young Fenrir!"

"Charlotte..."

"Who...is she?" the director asked, perplexed.

Before Allen could reply, the staff who had first retrieved them exclaimed eagerly, "She might just do it! She was taming all the beasts in the petting zoo without using any magic!"

"But those beasts are gentle by nature, aren't they?" The other staff weren't so sure. "A Fenrir is a whole different story..."

Allen, however, curled up his lips a little. *Hmph...she's really starting to change.* Previously, Charlotte would have listened to Allen obediently as soon as he refused, but now, she still looked determined, unwilling to back down. When he had first met her, she had seemed like a delicate little doll, but now, here she was, trying to fight for the sake of others. This change in her fanned his fighting spirit even more.

He grinned and gave a pat on her shoulder. "All right then, I'll leave it up to you. You can persuade that pup and have her healed."

"Y-Yes!" Charlotte looked up and clenched her fists.

Allen turned to the director. "Could you please let her try talking to the young Fenrir? I think she has considerable talent for becoming a beast tamer."

"If you recommend her, I'll trust your judgment. It's not as if we have many options..."

"That's settled then." It wasn't the first time Allen and Charlotte worked together. But this time, they were forming a united front in a shared battle. "Let's get started. Time to go meet the wolves!"

"Yes!"



Allen left Charlotte and circled around to the back of the zoo. Vast flatland stretched into the distance, just like the fields they had seen on their way to the region. It was still long before sunset, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky.

Just around the border between the sky and the horizon, he could see a faint cloud of dust rising. He could hear vague sounds of pounding feet and the snarls of many creatures. The pack was hurtling across the field straight toward him.

"Hmm...I suppose Fenrirs do live in packs." They say the sight of one Fenrir brings you luck. With a whole pack of them coming at him, Allen figured his luck would shoot up to the skies. He needed a bit of escapism to cope with the crisis. "Well, there's no turning back now. I'll put up a barrier around the zoo while I have time."

Weaving together his magic spells, he constructed a protective dome over the entire zoo. At least the people inside should be safe for the time being.

"Right. Next—"

A gust of wind rushed behind Allen. Spinning around, he saw a row of sharp fangs right in front of him.

"Gawrrrrr!!!"

A gaping mouth as grizzly as the gates of hell gnashed at Allen. The beast clamped its jaws over his upper body and swung him around. A normal human would've died instantly, but Allen moved his left hand inside the wolf's muzzle. "*Paralyze!*"

ZAP!

A flash of purple light shot out, and the Fenrir spat out Allen in surprise. Allen rolled away on the grass and wiped the saliva off his face with a wry laugh. A faint light enwreathed his body. "Hah, looks like I put on my protective spell right in time. So you're leading the attack, huh?"

“Grrrrr...”

The Fenrir towered over Allen. Its colossal body was about ten meters high, towering over him. There was a deep scar across its right eye, and its fur was a blinding gold. It fixed Allen with a bloodthirsty glare. This was probably the mother, who was over a century old.

Allen tried to reason with it in beast language. *“Please listen to me! We aren’t—”*

“Gawrrrrr!!!”

“Tch... Nothing...” It was the same as with the young Fenrir. Attempting communication seemed hopeless. “Then I suppose...I can only use force!”

Blue lights exploded behind Allen, and howls rang out in the air. Something had set off the trap he had set. When the lights faded, there were about ten Fenrirs bound in ice. All of them were similar in size as the young one rescued by the zoo, so he assumed they were her siblings.

“Ten down, one to go!”

“Gawrrrrr!”

The battle commenced. His plan was to do his utmost to buy time until Charlotte could persuade the young Fenrir, and they could complete the treatment. This mission, however, was turning out to be much more difficult than he had expected.

“Explo—I mean, Fire Ball!” He almost made a ball of fire big enough to swallow the mother Fenrir, but he shrank it into the size of a basketball before flinging it at the wolf. But this attack didn’t even singe her fur.

“Gawr!”

He had to hold back so as not to hurt the Fenrir, but of course, the Fenrir had no such reservations. She threw herself at him, slashed at him with her claws, and tried to bite off his limbs, but he managed to dodge her attacks by a hair’s breadth each time.

Crap! I can’t use any stronger spells... “Ice Bind!”

But none of his spells for paralysis had any effect on the Fenrir. She was so powerful that she extracted herself from the ice before it could freeze around her. He was running out of ideas.

“Gawrrrrr!” The Fenrir let out a ferocious growl, and her long hair shot out like needles. A thick cloud of dust rose around them, as a storm of sharp hair pelted down on him. The dust shifted in a whirl of air, and Allen found himself face-to-face with her fangs again.

“Ugh, not again...” He still had his protective spell on him, so he wouldn’t die, but he resigned himself to becoming soaked in saliva for the second time.

But before he could be slobbered, a shadow shot out in front of Allen, and the Fenrir froze.

“Squeak!”

“Gawr?!”

“Huh?” Allen stared wide-eyed at the white ball of fur before him.

“A Vorpall Bunny?”

“Squeaaaak.”

Somehow, a Vorpall Bunny from the petting zoo had wandered into the battle. The Fenrir looked confused too, staring at the human-sized rabbit.

Allen came to himself and shouted, *“Wh-What are you doing here?! Run!”*

“Why would I?” The Vorpall Bunny cocked its head. The gesture itself looked comical and carefree, though the situation was very tense. Without budging, it kept squealing in a lighthearted tone. *“We all came out here together, you know. Let us hang around for a while.”*

“We?”

Just as Allen was wondering what that meant, there was a huge rumble over the ground, and a horde of beasts descended upon the field.

“Whoa?!”

There was the Ancient Dragon, said to have been living for 10,000 years; the Phoenix, glowing in a magnificent, all-consuming fire; and the Chimaera with the body of a lion and the wings of a falcon. And they weren’t all—the back gate of the zoo swung open, and all kinds of terrestrial beasts marched out. Their movements seemed coordinated, so it looked more like a parade than a mass escape.

Allen was looking on in stunned silence when someone called out to him. “Oh! Allen!”

“Charlotte?!”

Charlotte was approaching on the back of an Infernal Capybara. The other beasts calmly stepped aside to make way for them like faithful followers. Allen rushed over to meet her.

“Wh-What’s all this?! What happened to the Fenrir child?”

“Of course, everything is all fine!” She beamed.

At this, a large shadow flew overhead. The young silver Fenrir landed gracefully next to them. Though her fur was still a bit shaggy, she had much more vigor than before. She turned to her mother and howled earnestly. “Grr, roo!”

“Gawr?” The mother narrowed her eyes and listened carefully to her pup. The pup seemed to be explaining what had happened to her. The mother’s ferocity faded away, and her expression softened.

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief. “I tried my best to talk to her after you left. She listened to me, and we were able to give her proper treatment!”

“W-Wow, you really did it...” Allen was blown away, though he

was still puzzled by the assembly of beasts around them. “And? What are they doing here?”

“Um, when I tried to come to you with the Fenrir...everyone said they wanted to come along because they were worried about me...so I couldn’t say no.”

“Don’t tell me...you actually understand their language?!”

“Y-Yes. Only vaguely...but I can understand them!”

She said it like it was nothing, but it had taken Allen at least half a year to master the most basic level of their language. *If she receives proper training...she might become a witch as powerful as me.* He had the feeling that they would make quite an invincible pair: a formidable Dark Overlord and a supreme beast tamer.

“Grr...” Allen tensed at the low growl right behind him. He turned around to find the Fenrir mother looking down at him. She gestured with her muzzle toward her children, still bound by ice.

Charlotte whispered in his ear, “I think she’s asking you to free them. They won’t attack anymore.”

“Ah, right. Got it.”

He snapped his fingers, and the ice melted all at once. The siblings shook off the damp from their fur, and the mother looked content. She was about to depart when Charlotte stopped her.

“Uh, um, wait a moment, please, mother Fenrir!” The mother turned around slowly. Charlotte pointed to the silver Fenrir and bowed. “Could you please let her stay for another day? Her wounds are almost healed, but she still needs to receive some medical tests... Please let them treat her.”

The mother Fenrir stared at Charlotte with her one eye. Allen braced himself in the tense moment, but nothing alarming happened.

“Gawrr...” Instead, the mother Fenrir startled Charlotte with a lick on Charlotte’s face. The wounded pup snuggled up to Charlotte too, rubbing her fur against her. Allen almost couldn’t believe it was the same wolf that had been growling so viciously in the cage.

There was a lot more to be said, but he settled on, “Well...case closed, I suppose.”

The Infernal Capybara that had been carrying Charlotte on its back squealed, “*Well done, young’un. For a human with a peculiar growth on his head, you’re not bad.*”

“Huh? What the hell do you—ah!” Allen felt his head with his hand and remembered. Just like Charlotte, he was still wearing cat ears.



When the full moon rose high in the sky that night, a group wandered through the mountains of the Yunoha Region, hidden in the

dark. They looked menacing, each heavily armed.

One of them, who was especially burly and apparently the leader, shot a sharp look deep in the forest. "You swear it went this way?"

"Y-Yessir. No doubt about it. I saw it going back to the pack."

"But it's too bad the zoo got to that little beast first," another one said.

"Tell me about it. It took a lot of work to corner that one," the leader sighed, but sneered. "But if we find more of them pups, we're still in luck. We can round up the lot of them."

"Yessir! With all the poisons we've brought with us, even the big mamma can't stop us!"

"A hundred gold coins for one pup—we'll be rich before we know it!"

"When we're done with this, let's head to a brothel and party out!"

Repulsive laughter echoed in the dark forest. They were clearly a group of poachers. That sealed their punishment.

"Ice Bind."

"Ack?!" The men screamed as the ground at their feet froze over. They tried to hack away at the ice that covered them up to their knees, but even their swords couldn't leave a dent.

Allen casually emerged before the panic-stricken men. "Hm, you showed up right where I expected you to. It's so simple to read the minds of villains—thanks for making it easy."

"Wh-Who the hell are you?!"

"No one worth naming. I'm just an escort at the moment."

The men went deathly pale. "What the—?!" The ground shuddered, and the Fenrir mother emerged from the shadows with a heavy, rumbling tread. Of course, her children followed. They glared at the poachers and each let out a low, ominous growl.

The men shrieked in fear. The sound of the wolves alone had been enough for them to get a sense of what fate awaited them. They trembled uncontrollably and began to beg for their lives. "S-Spare us, please! Please don't kill us!"

"What are you saying?" Allen answered. "Of course, we won't kill you. We'll be handing you over to the authorities."

"Huh? R-Really?!" The men looked obviously relieved.

Allen was telling the truth. After much persuasion by Charlotte, he had promised her that he wouldn't kill off the poachers even if he found them. But, of course, they had to have their revenge. "Well, before we go ahead... *Fortify.*"

"Huh?"

At a snap of Allen's fingers, the men's bodies began to glow faintly. It was a spell to strengthen their defensive power, though he

made the spell a little less effective than usual. He had struck just the right balance—they wouldn't feel a slap at all, but if someone threw a knockout punch at them, it would hurt a bit.

Allen turned to the Fenrir family with a bright smile. "All right, now you can do whatever you want with them and they won't die. Feel free to let out all that pent-up anger."

"Gawwwrrrrrr!"

"Aiiiiieeeeeeee!"

The Fenrirs chomped on the men all night, until they felt like a bunch of toy bones.



The next morning, as they prepared to leave the Yunoha Resort hotel, Allen and Charlotte found themselves being thanked by the mermaid concierge again. "Thank you ever so much for everything!" She gave them a deep bow. "I heard all about your day at the zoo! They say you saved the Fenrir!"

"Hmph. I suppose we did," Allen said with a thin smile and gave Charlotte a pat on the shoulder. "It's all thanks to her."

"Oh my, how splendid!"

"What?!" Charlotte cried out, wide-eyed. She protested timidly, "But it was the zoo staff who healed the poor Fenrir's wounds, and you captured the bad people. All I did was do some talking, really..."

"But if not for you, things wouldn't have been resolved so peacefully." The young Fenrir would have continued to refuse treatment, and the mother's fury would've been unstoppable. Allen would have been forced to hurt the Fenrir family to protect the zoo. "So this is your achievement, Charlotte. Be proud of it."

"M-My..." Stunned, she stared down at her own hands.

The mermaid turned to her and bowed again. "Thank you so, so much. I'm so glad you saved that Fenrir pup!"

"Yes!" Charlotte replied with a radiant smile.

In the end, their hot springs trip turned out to be not just fun, but also a growing experience for Charlotte. Allen made a mental note to thank Miach and the townspeople when they returned. He had his own opinion about the specific "course" Miach had chosen for them, but all in all, he was content.

"Right, shall we start heading back?"

"Your carriage is all ready. Here you are."

"Thank you for everything—oh?" Charlotte paused and turned away.

Allen followed her gaze. "Hm? What is it?"

Suddenly, a massive shadow fell over the ground. The Fenrir mother alighted with a heavy rumble. Her pups followed suit, and

chaos broke out among the people around them.

“Oh my goodness! So many Fenrirs! Right in front of us!” the mermaid raved. “I’ve never seen them so close in all my two hundred years!” Some of the guests were running away screaming, others were shouting in excitement.

Allen looked up at the Fenrir mother and cocked his head. “Let me guess... Have you come to say good-bye to us?”

“Gawr!” she barked lightly, apparently in a good mood.

A pup peered out from behind her mother’s forelegs. It was the one they’d rescued. Her silver fur was glowing now, all traces of blood having been wiped away clean, and her steps were light. Apparently, they had just been to the zoo to retrieve her.

Charlotte’s face lit up at the sight of the pup. “Oh! Dear little Fenrir!”

“Woof!”

“You look all better. I’m so glad.” When she stroked her fur, the pup narrowed her eyes in pleasure. Unlike his usual self, Allen felt rather softened by the heartwarming, peaceful scene. When the young Fenrir barked a little more, Charlotte gasped, “Oh! Really?! Are you sure?”

“What’s she saying?”

“I-I think,” she said timidly, still petting the pup’s head, “she wants to come with us.”

“What?!” Even Allen was taken aback, but apparently, Charlotte had understood the Fenrir correctly. The mother and the pup’s siblings looked on without any sign of surprise. They seemed to be standing by to see off a member of their family. Allen asked the mother, “Wait, are you sure about this? She’s your precious child, after all.”

“Gawrr!”

Allen could guess what the mother wanted to say: if you love your children, send them out into the world.

Charlotte furrowed her brow anxiously. “B-But...wouldn’t you miss your family?”

“That’s probably nothing to worry about,” the mermaid concierge interjected. “Was it the Groll Region you live in? For a Fenrir, it would only take about an hour to return here. So it’ll be like a casual homestay.”

“I see.” In that case, Allen felt confident enough to take her in. He crouched down a little and peered into the Fenrir’s eyes. Where there was only animosity yesterday, they were now filled with a warm, gentle glow. “All right, you can stay at my place. Keep Charlotte company, will you?”

“Woof!”

“A-Are you really happy with that? You’ll have to look after

another guest, on top of me..." Charlotte said.

"Why would I mind?" Allen replied. His mansion was spacious, and it was far from the city. It wouldn't bother anyone if he had one extra family member who was a little big. There was plenty of nature around them for taking walks, and Allen had some experience with keeping magical beasts. In short, there was no problem at all. Having explained this, he grinned. "Besides, it's nice to have more family, isn't it?"

Charlotte looked surprised. "F-Family? Do you mean...me too?"

"Of course. Isn't it obvious?" Allen tilted his head. Though he'd been flustered by being called a couple, married or not, he could say one thing with proud certainty. "You're already a precious member of my family."

Charlotte turned bright red, and she was at a loss for words.

"Hm? What happened? You've gone quiet all of a sudden. Did I say anything odd?"

"Oh, i-it's...nothing..."

"Gawr..." For reasons unknown to Allen, the Fenrir mother stared at him with an expression of mild disbelief. The children didn't get it, though, and they cocked their heads, just like Allen.

"Well then..." The mermaid seemed to take the hint and said with a dazzling smile, "When you go on your real honeymoon, we would be more than happy to host you again!"

Epilogue: Not Scared of the Night Anymore

Morning came. Charlotte jolted awake at the faint twittering of birds. “Mm?” She sat up in bed and looked around.

She was in a narrow room. It was rather dusty and cluttered, with wooden boxes and other objects in haphazard piles. There was only one iron-barred window high up near the ceiling. She gazed up at the window absentmindedly. Just beyond it, she could make out the blue sky.

Only a thin blanket, full of holes, covered her, and her pajamas were just as shabby. The room was a detached storage space on the premises of Duke Evans’s main residence. This was all she had in the world.

It was an ordinary morning on an ordinary day. But she had the slight feeling that she had been having a strange dream. “Something about...” She had gone somewhere else, and she had been doing something with someone. That was all she could remember. But an unfamiliar sensation, something warm, lingered in the depths of her heart.

She held her hands to her chest and tried to bring back her dream. Nothing came—all it produced was a prickling pain in her heart.

A bell rang in the distance, startling her. “Oh no, I’ll be late!”

She sprang up from the bed and started getting ready. Today, as any other day, she couldn’t waste a single minute or even a second. Changing into tattered clothing that was barely any different from her pajamas, she rushed out of the room.



Charlotte’s mother had been one of the maids of the Evans estate. At the time, the master of the house had a wife, but she was prone to sickness, almost always bedridden. There was no hope of her producing an heir, so the master then put his hands on one of the maids. A tale as old as time, common in all corners of the world.

However, in this case, a little twist came when the maid, realizing her pregnancy, vanished without saying a word to the master. In a small village in the countryside, far away from the capital of Neils Kingdom, she gave birth to Charlotte. Then she raised her daughter all

by herself. They were never well-off, far from it, but their days were quiet and tranquil. This went on until Charlotte turned seven, when her mother died of a plague. The day after her mother's death, a servant of the duke's household appeared at the door to claim Charlotte.

These days, she entered the main building of the Evans estate from the back door to the kitchen. She greeted everyone with a deep bow. "G-Good morning."

She was met with silence. In the kitchen, numerous cooks and maids were bustling about, but no one glanced her way, let alone answered her. A black fog hung over their faces, and she couldn't read their expressions at all.

Still, Charlotte sat down at a small table in the corner of the kitchen, keeping her eyes on the floor. Her breakfast was already there, as usual. Today, it was a piece of bread with roast beef and consommé soup. Though it sounded luxurious, it was only the master's leftovers from the night before. The bread was dry and hard, the side vegetables were wilting, and even the soup was lukewarm.

"Thank you for the breakfast." Charlotte ate quickly. She could sense looks of derision directed at her, with snickering and scoffing here and there in the room. Naturally, she couldn't even taste her food. She focused on eating as a mechanical chore, making sure not to lift her face and counting the grains in the wooden table.

After breakfast, it was time for cleaning. A maid, her face shrouded in black fog, held out a bucket and a wiping cloth. "They want you to clean this part of the house today, Miss."

"Y-Yes, ma'am." Charlotte took the items and started wiping the banisters of the staircase, the windows, and so on.

This was her morning routine. As a result, Charlotte's hands were rough and red all year round. In winter, her hands became so badly chapped that they bled, so she had to take the utmost care not to stain the furniture.

They made her clean a different part of the mansion each day, but some things never changed. While she was focused on wiping a picture frame, a maid bumped into her from behind.

"Eep!" Charlotte gasped.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss, didn't see you there." This maid's face was hidden behind black fog too. She walked away with another maid, snickering to each other.

"Did you hear her little squeak? Ugh, so fake."

"Seriously, she's so slow. Can you believe she's related to the Master at all?"

They knew Charlotte could hear them mocking her. That was the point. When they disappeared around the corner of the hallway, she

resumed her wiping. Though there wasn't much dust on the frames, she'd been ordered to clean. So she cleaned.

"D-Dear sister..." a meek voice called her.

"Oh!" Charlotte whirled around to find a little girl standing next to her.

The girl had glowing blonde hair and deep crimson eyes. Her features were finely carved like a doll's, and she was dressed in elegant clothes. There was no fog at all on her face, and she looked rather nervous.

Charlotte paused in her cleaning and gave her a deep bow. "Good morning, Lady Natalia."

"Good morning..."

Natalia Evans was the second daughter of the duke, and to Charlotte, she was a little sister born of a different mother. She had been born when Charlotte was ten, and Natalia was seven years old now. Since she was the legitimate child of the Master and his wife, all the servants adored her and treated her like a treasure.

Charlotte used to coddle her too, years ago, but after her stepmother admonished Charlotte for being too familiar, she had to be more formal and polite with her. But for Natalia, she was still the same Charlotte, her sweet older sister. Natalia tried to treat Charlotte just as she always had.

Natalia clasped her fingers together, as if in prayer, and looked up at Charlotte. "Do you have any time to play today, dear sister? Could we have some storybook time?"

"Well..." Charlotte choked on her words. She wanted to grant Natalia's wish, but it was simply impossible. She could only shake her head helplessly, though it broke her heart. "I'm sorry... Please invite me another time."

"I understand," Natalia nodded, downcast. But she looked up again eagerly and held out a tiny bottle. "This is for you. It's medicine, because your hand looked so hurt. Please use it."

"Th-Thank you...very much." Charlotte took the small bottle timidly.

From time to time, Natalia gave her little things like this in secret. Sometimes it was a fruit, or some stationery—but more than the object itself, her sister's sentiment touched Charlotte, and each time it almost brought tears to her eyes.

The sisters were quiet for a while. "Oh, dear sister," Natalia broke the silence as she murmured, her face crumpled as if she was about to cry. "I'll get bigger soon. And when I'm bigger, I'll—"

"Natalia," said a stern voice.

Natalia froze. Someone had crept up behind Charlotte. Charlotte could tell who had spoken without turning around. Her legs wobbled.

A painful tingling ran through her head. Nonetheless, she gulped, slowly turned around, and bowed.

“Good morning...Lady Cordelia,” Charlotte said.

“Yes,” the woman in a luxurious, jet-black dress gave her a terse nod.

She was the current matriarch of the Evans family, Cordelia Evans. She was the Master’s second wife, after an illness took his first wife. Although she was Natalia’s biological mother and Charlotte’s stepmother, she was only twenty-five years old. Her dark purple hair was curled into elegant rolls, and she was heavily adorned with jewelry.

Black haze enveloped her whole body. Only the fiery red of her lips was visible from a slight gap in the fog.

“M-Mother...” Natalia mumbled. Cordelia only gave her a nod. This was how Cordelia usually treated her—without a shred of motherly concern.

“Your tutor has arrived,” Cordelia told Charlotte in an emotionless tone. “Hurry up and go to your lessons.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.” Charlotte scrambled to put away the bucket and cloth.

Every morning, Charlotte cleaned the mansion. Then, when the private tutors came, her lessons began. She received the basic education necessary for the future bride of a prince, including literature, music, embroidery, and horseback riding. She was thoroughly trained on a wide variety of topics.

Charlotte liked learning. She could forget other things when she was concentrating on her studies, and she felt a sense of achievement when she managed to do something she couldn’t do before. There was one big problem, however.

The lips behind the black mist curled up in a malicious smile. “I shall watch your lessons today.”

Charlotte stopped breathing. She could feel the blood draining from her own face. Natalia’s face twisted too, as she tried not to cry.

But Cordelia went on, ignoring the sisters’ reactions. “Make sure you behave for your tutor, Charlotte.”

Charlotte barely managed to squeeze out an answer. “Y-Yes, ma’am...”



Finally, night came. Silent darkness absorbed the faint sounds of sobbing.

Charlotte was weeping quietly in a pitch-black room. This wasn’t her own room in the storage building. It was the pantry underneath the main building. It was windowless, and bitterly cold inside. The

darkness was so thick she couldn't even see her own fingertips.

Sometimes, Cordelia accompanied Charlotte's lessons. On the face of it, she appeared to be a caring mother who was concerned about her daughter. But in truth, she was nothing of the kind. Whenever Charlotte made a mistake, or couldn't answer a question, or failed at something, Cordelia would punish her.

She would lash out at Charlotte with a storm of insults like "Why can't you even do a simple thing like this?!" "You bring shame on our family!" "You filthy—! If only you didn't exist, I would—!"

The tutors would look on, turning pale, but nobody tried to stop her. Charlotte would stifle her cries, trying to weather her attacks as best she could.

In the past, Cordelia was kinder to Charlotte, at least to some extent. It was clear she disliked her stepdaughter, but she wanted to keep up appearances and tried to act the part of a mother. Then Natalia was born, and after a few years, her behavior had suddenly changed. Charlotte had turned into an enemy in her eyes, and she took out her hatred on her.

Charlotte had no idea what triggered this resentment from Cordelia. Meanwhile, the Master, Charlotte's actual father, displayed no interest in her. He was rarely home to begin with. Even when he was around, no matter how cruelly Cordelia treated Charlotte, he didn't even glance her way.

Tonight, Charlotte was given additional punishment because, unfortunately, the small bottle of medicine that Natalia had given her had fallen out of her pocket when she was beaten. Cordelia accused her of stealing from the house, but Charlotte couldn't say anything. She couldn't get her little sister in trouble.

Cordelia was indifferent to her own daughter, and she was never physically violent to Natalia. But if it was revealed that she had helped Charlotte, Natalia might become the next target of her wrath. It was easy to imagine such an outcome.

And so, Charlotte accepted her punishment and was locked up in the dark. She hated being there. But she knew that even if she cried and screamed for help, no one would come for her. On the contrary, that could provoke an even harsher punishment, so all she could do was to endure it until it was over.

She sobbed quietly. It was scary. She didn't like the dark. She didn't like pain. Most of all, she didn't like being lonely. But she came to a realization:

At least...I don't have to feel pain when I'm here.

Here, there was only darkness. No one to mock her, no one to hurt her—no one. She missed her little sister, but even so, it was easier to breathe in here than when she was outside.

As soon as the thought came to her mind, the darkness writhed around her. It rose into solid shapes and began to coil around Charlotte. The thing had bony, chapped hands—like her own, pitiful hands. A swarm of hands emerged from the darkness and clung to her body. The boundary between the darkness and her body began to blur, and Charlotte let her eyelids close slowly. If the darkness could swallow her up completely, she wouldn't have to think about anything anymore, she wouldn't have to feel any pain, and she would just lie in peace, and sleep—

“Sooo damp and gloomy, it's bad for your health!”

BOOOOM!!!

“?!”

A ridiculously thunderous roar shattered the darkness. Charlotte jumped up, eyes wide open.

Light was flooding in. There was a gaping hole in the wall, as if someone had punched through it, and a world of bright, white light stretched beyond the opening. Illuminated by the light, there stood a young man in a robe.

His hair was half black, half white. He had a scowl on his face like it was the end of the world. She had never seen him before.

“Wh-Who...are you?”

“Huh? Ah, well...let's see...” He pondered for a little while, then said simply, “I'm the Dark Overlord. I came to abduct you.”

“Uh...?”

“Come now, we haven't got all day. You should get out of this place as soon as possible.” Without hesitation, the young man stretched out his hand to her.

His face was completely clear of the black fog. It felt bright and warm where he stood, the opposite of the darkness she had been confined to.

Even so, she shook her head. “I-I can't...”

“Why?”

“I-It's...scary outside. At least here, there's...nothing...” Charlotte hung her head. The darkness still clung to her; it wouldn't let her go. It whispered to her that she belonged in darkness, that it was only in darkness she could survive.

But the young man stepped into the dark and knelt in front of her. “Don't worry,” he said with a gentle smile. “I'll never let go of your hand. I'll protect you from anyone and anything, I promise. So...let's go.” Then he offered his hand again.



Charlotte held back her breath. Timidly, she lifted her hand and touched his. In that instant, the darkness burst like a balloon and the world was engulfed in light.



When Charlotte awoke, she was lying on a new bed. “Oh...” She rose slowly, rubbing her heavy eyelids and looking around her.

There was her bed, and a closet. A writing desk and a chair, and a bookshelf that was still mostly empty. It was a simple but comfortable room. Beside her on the bed slept the Fenrir pup, Roo, that she had befriended by chance. She wasn’t at the Evans estate. She was in Allen’s mansion, in a room that was actually hers.

It was still dark outside the window. It seemed hours before sunrise. The air was hushed, and not a rustle could be heard.

“I think...I might have been dreaming,” Charlotte murmured to herself. She couldn’t remember most of the dream—only the fear, the unremitting fear, remained in her like an unpleasant lump. She must have dreamed about her life with the Evans family.

It was the first nightmare she had had since coming to Allen’s mansion. In the beginning, she had been so tired that she’d slept like a rock, dreamless. Perhaps having this dream tonight was a sign that she was growing accustomed to her new life. If that was the case, she wished she’d had a more pleasant dream. “But maybe...part of it was nice.” There was something other than fear at the very end. She had the sensation that she’d touched something warm. She might have seen her little sister.

Charlotte reached for the chest of drawers next to the bed. Sliding open the top drawer, she looked at the picture book that she kept inside. It was a simple picture book about children going to a zoo of magical beasts and having a fun time there—the same book Charlotte had read when she was little. She had come across this copy the other day when she’d gone to the city by herself. She’d bought it hoping she could read it to Natalia some day when they met again.

“I wonder if I managed to read to her in my dream...” She was a little disappointed that she couldn’t even remember that.

Even so, she couldn’t bring herself to go back to sleep, afraid she might slip into the same dream again. And this time, it might turn into a nightmare that was horrifying from beginning to end. She shuddered. Then, taking care not to make a sound, she crept out of bed.

She decided to drink some water and stay up till the morning. She stopped by the living room, surprised to see a sliver of light coming out through the crack in the door. When she slowly opened the door,

she found Allen sitting in his usual spot on the sofa.

He noticed Charlotte and raised a hand. "Hey. You're awake?"

"Y-Yes." She drew closer timidly. There were thick books and piles of papers scattered over the low table. He was apparently doing some writing. "Are you working, Allen?"

"Oh, just doing someone a little favor," he shrugged. "Remember Magus?"

"Y-Yes. From the adventuring party in the city."

It had been a couple of weeks ago that she ventured to the city with Allen and Eluka, and got involved in a small commotion. They had met Magus of the Rock People, who used to be Allen's pupil.

"He told me he wants to train himself up from scratch again. So I'm devising his personal training plan."

"I see..." For Charlotte, Magus was a towering, frightening figure. But still, Allen had succeeded in reforming him easily and was even looking after him now. She broke into a smile. "You really are very kind."

"Nah, it's just a hobby of mine to give people a training regimen that pushes them to the brink of death."

"Ah..."

"The Rock People are very sturdy, you know. It'll be a real treat," Allen said excitedly, flipping through the thick pile of pages. She thought she caught glimpses of rather ominous words, like "magma," "3,000 meters altitude," and "100 hours of endurance."

When she'd first met him, Charlotte couldn't tell whether Allen's extreme remarks were spoken in jest or not. But lately, she was getting better at decoding them. What he said now about Magus's training was probably ninety percent true. The remaining ten percent was his kindness, of which he himself was unaware.

You can be strange...but first and foremost, you're a kind person, Allen. She knew Allen would only brush away such a comment if she told him, so she merely let out a giggle. Instead, she said, "I can't sleep. Can I...stay here with you?"

"Sure." Allen gave a slight nod and moved to make space for her—but he had an idea and looked up at her. "Actually, tonight might be good for..."

"What, Allen?"

"Of course..." Allen held up a finger and laughed mischievously. "A naughty pleasure you can only have at night."



Charlotte waited for ten minutes.

"All right, you can come out now," Allen called.

"Y-Yes," she replied. She opened the back door of the mansion

and stepped out into the large garden, which had a well and some beds for growing herbs. One corner was illuminated by countless lanterns. "Wow..." Charlotte breathed.

Allen had pulled the living room sofa outside and hung lights all around it. A small bonfire burned nearby, and something simmered in a pot above it. It was like they were camping.

Allen scooped up some of the liquid from the pot into a mug and handed it to her. "Here. Careful, it's hot."

"Is this...hot chocolate?" Steam rose from the light brown beverage under the gentle glow of the lanterns. There were even some big marshmallows floating in the mug.

He flashed her a smug grin. "Exactly. We can sip on it while looking at the stars."

"S-Sounds lovely!" Her face lit up.

It was like a dream. Allen led her to the sofa, and when she sat back, she could see all across the starry night sky. Since they were far away from the city, nothing interfered with their light. She gazed up, entranced by the glittering sky. Allen sat down beside her and started fidgeting with something like an incense burner.

"Is that some aromatic incense?" she asked.

"Just insect repellent. And put this on too."

A blanket fell on her out of empty space. "Oof!" She wrapped herself in it, just as she was told. Even though it was spring, the night breeze still held a hint of the winter chill. She felt warm and cozy in the blanket. The sweet scent of the incense wafted around them, and it seemed to clear away the lingering fear and distress inside her.

The whole sky glimmered with countless stars. And on the ground, she sat in this warm cocoon. There was bliss wherever she turned.

"So, how do you like it?"

"V-Very much! It's exciting!"

"Good, glad to hear it." Allen sipped the hot chocolate, then a self-deprecating smile flitted across his face. "Though I confess...I don't know much about stars at all."

"Really? But you know everything!"

"I know all about how the position of the stars influences mana. But when it comes to constellations or mythology, I'm clueless."

In a way, this was fitting for the self-disciplined and practical Allen. Charlotte pointed at the sky and said, "Um, that yellow star over there, that's the eye of the Arachnid. And underneath, on the right, there's the Infernal Capybara."

"It only looks like a cluster of dots to me..." He squinted hard at the sky. His face was on the sinister side even at normal times, so when he was narrowing his eyes like that, there was some aura about

him that befitted his “Dark Overlord” nickname.

Charlotte giggled. “I had many kinds of lessons at home, so that’s how I learned about constellations.”

Allen looked slightly grim. “I see.”

She wondered why he looked sullen, but he started asking her questions about constellations, so she quickly forgot about it. She pointed out different shapes in the sky and told him about the myths connected to them. While he listened to her attentively, he also told her about the relationship between magic and astronomy. As they talked on and on about this and that, their words seemed to form gentle layers in the veil of night wrapping around them. After a long time, Charlotte yawned.

“Getting sleepy?” Allen smiled gently, putting down his cup. “Do you want to get back to bed? I’ll accompany you to your room.”

Charlotte was quiet for a few moments, then she shook her head slowly. “I...I don’t want to sleep tonight.” In low murmurs, she confessed her scary nightmare to him—and how she was afraid she’d have the same dream again. Allen listened to her closely.

What if he thinks I’m being childish? She thought, hanging her head. Only a little child would be afraid of a nightmare.

“Don’t worry,” said Allen, taking her hand gently.

She looked up in surprise. She could sense a slight tension through his palm.

Allen looked straight into her round eyes and assured her, “I told you. I’ll never let go of your hand. I’ll protect you from anyone and anything, I promise.” Then he grinned. “Even when you’re trapped in a nightmare, I’ll always come to rescue you. So don’t worry about a thing.”

“Allen...” She felt heady at his ardent words. Even so, she was puzzled about one thing. “Did you...ever say something like that to me before?”

“I did indeed. You probably just forgot.”

“That’s...a bit too bad,” she laughed softly.

She was sure he would never lie. So she trusted him that he had offered her that promise somewhere before—and that he really meant to keep it. A warm feeling embraced her. She suddenly felt intensely drowsy.

She was rubbing her eyes when Allen asked, “If you’re scared of your own dreams, do you want to come to mine?”

“Come to your dream?”

“Yeah. I know a spell that lets you slip into someone else’s dream. I can cast it on you.”

“Th-There’s a spell for that? You really can do anything with magic.”

“Well...the spell didn’t really exist before, but I kind of had to whip it up in a hurry,” he mumbled, then quickly changed the subject. “Anyhow. What kind of dream do you like to have? Tell me anything you want.”

“Let’s see...” Charlotte thought, as long as Allen was with her, it would be fun whatever the dream. But she made a specific request anyway. “I’d like to look at the stars with you in a dream too.”

“All right, you got it.”

They laughed and rose from the sofa together.

It wasn’t long ago that most of the world had frightened her. But now...not even the darkness of the night could scare her anymore.

Extra Chapter: How to Have Naughty Fun by the Sea

That day, Allen and Charlotte were lying around listlessly at home.

“So...hot...” he groaned.

“I’m melting...” she agreed.

They both had towels around their necks, and were drooping over the sofa. No matter how many times they wiped away their sweat, it came back instantly, and their clothes were soaked in perspiration.

Normally, weather in this region was mild at this time of year, but they had seen a scorching heat wave over the last several days. The sunlight pouring through the windows was an act of violence in itself. Even Allen, who would have had no problem surviving in a garbage dump, found it hard to bear the heat.

He heaved a tremendous sigh as he wiped his sweat again. “Ugh, this heat is insane... It’s a little early, but maybe it’s time to bring out the enchanted air-conditioning...”

“You can use magic to cool the air? That’s amazing.”

“Well, it *would* be useful if I can find it in the back of the storage room... It might take some effort to dig it up.”

“I’ll look for it with you...” Though she offered to help, Charlotte clearly sounded weak. Her blouse was plastered down with sweat, which made her skin show through a little. Her cheeks were flushed, and the way she was draped over the sofa was rather suggestive.

Allen had to avert his eyes. He was going to be in trouble in more ways than one if he didn’t get that air conditioner soon. “Appreciate the offer, but there’s a lot of dangerous knickknacks in there. I can look for it on my own. You just rest here and make sure you stay hydrated.”

“If you’re sure it’s okay... Thank you.” Charlotte reached for her glass on the table. Her thin throat quivered a little when she swallowed the lukewarm water. Allen’s eyes were helplessly riveted to a bead of sweat trickling down the line of her neck. Then he came to himself and scrambled to his feet.

It’s no use... My head’s not working in this heat... He resolved to get the air conditioner running as soon as possible and was about to step out into the sweltering sun when Roo padded in from the entrance hall.

“Gawr!”

“Oh, look who’s here. Welcome home, Roo.”

Roo had gone away to see her family yesterday, and now she had returned. Charlotte greeted her with a smile. “How was your trip, Roo? Did you have a relaxing time with your family?”

“Woof woof! Gawr!” Roo replied cheerfully, pleased to get petted by Charlotte. Even though she had traveled back and forth a distance that would have taken an entire day on a horse-drawn carriage, she didn’t seem tired at all. She didn’t seem bothered by the heat either.

Allen stared at the back of her head, wondering how Roo was fine with her thick coat of fur. Suddenly, he noticed something. “Hey, Roo. What’s that you’ve got on you?”

“Wooooof.”

“Oh? I wonder,” Charlotte said.

A cloth bag was tied to Roo’s neck, almost completely hidden in her long fur. When Charlotte unraveled it, she found one letter and another parcel inside. The letter was sealed with wax, and the stamp held the insignia of the Yunoha Resort.

“Isn’t this the hotel we stayed at?” she asked.

“Indeed... Let’s see what it says.” Allen took the letter and scanned the message.

The letter had been written by the mermaid concierge who had kindly served them on their holiday. In neat handwriting, she told them how the Fenrir family had begun to frequent their usual hill again after that incident, and there were even more visitors to the area now; how some locals had banded together to form a vigilante group; and many more pieces of news and words of gratitude. Allen read on, impressed by how conscientious she was, when he came to the last line. It read: “We would like to send a gift for both of you. We do hope this will help you get through the heat!”

“A gift?” Allen had no idea what it could be.

“Oh!” Charlotte cried out. Something slipped out of the other parcel when she tried to pick it up.

Allen stared wide-eyed at the “gift” scattered over the floor. “Are those—?”

“Swimming suits?” Charlotte finished his question.

“Gawr?”

They were the very same swimming suits that they had worn at the hot springs resort.

Now that they were equipped with bathing suits, in these days of scorching heat, there was only one thing for them to do.



The next day, the two of them were back in the Yunoha Region.

The deep blue ocean stretched out as far as they could see from the white sandy beach. There wasn't a cloud to be seen, and the sky was so blue that it was hard to tell where it met the sea.

"Wow..." Charlotte looked out at the stunning view with big eyes. She was wearing the gifted bathing suit she had chosen at the hotel, the bikini and pareo set. The salty breeze played with her long hair as she gazed at the sea for a while. Suddenly, she turned around to Allen and Roo. "Look, Allen! It's the sea! The sea!!!"

"Indeed. It's the sea." Allen, in swimming trunks, simply nodded.

"Gawrrr." Roo didn't seem to get her reaction either.

Back home, Allen's brain had been fried in the heat, and he couldn't think straight anymore. As soon as the gift of bathing suits arrived, they decided that they'd go to the beach.

They had only just stepped onto the sand, but Charlotte's excitement was at an all-time high. *I didn't expect the sea would make her this happy...* thought Allen. He went up to her and smiled. "Is it your first time seeing the ocean?"

"Y-Yes... I've never been so close to it before." She nodded awkwardly and dipped her toes in the water's edge. Water splashed on her sandaled foot, and she squealed a little. "The waves really do come and go, over and over again. It's fascinating."

Allen laughed. "If you want, I'll tell you about how it all works sometime." He would enjoy giving her a lesson on the tides and astronomy.

For today, however, the top priority was to enjoy the sea to the fullest. When he looked all around, there was a swarm of people who had come out to escape the heat, and many stalls dotted the beach. All in all, there were plenty of attractions for them to enjoy all day.

"All right, I'll teach you all about having fun at the beach today," Allen declared.

Charlotte eagerly balled her hands into fists. "Y-Yes please!"

He was happy to see her putting everything she had into whatever she tried. He took her hand and slowly waded into the sea. He kept going until the water came up to his waist, for a start.

The water was crystal clear, and they could easily see down to the bottom. As fish swam by, their scales shimmered in the sunlight.

Charlotte's face lit up, and she exclaimed, "L-Look, Allen! Fishies!"

"Well, yeah, we're in the sea, after all."

"Oh, I see seaweed growing over there! They're swaying in the water!"

"Indeed." Allen nodded along with a warm smile. Apparently, everything was new and interesting to her. She reported all the things she could see to him in high spirits.

But suddenly, she realized what she was doing and shrank back,

abashed. “Ah, I-I’m sorry... I’m getting too excited...”

“What are you saying? We came here for you, so feel free to enjoy it all you want.”

“You don’t think I’m too noisy?”

Allen answered honestly. “On the contrary, I want to listen to you forever.”

“R-Really...?” Charlotte widened her eyes a little, then smiled. “If you say so, I’ll have lots of fun—eep?!”

They yelped as a big wave crashed over them. The source of it had dived into the water next to them, then popped her head out of the water with a big fish flapping in her mouth.

“Woof!”

“Oh, Roo...” Allen sighed.

“Hee hee,” Charlotte giggled. “Looks like you’re loving the sea too, Roo.”

Charlotte’s damp hair clung to her skin, making the curves of her body more obvious. Allen felt his eyes getting drawn to her again and hurriedly stifled any desire to look at her. “Right! ‘Tit for tat’ is my motto! Take that, Roo!” he said as he splashed water all over Roo.

“Gawr?!” Startled by the counterattack, Roo dropped her fish. Her eyes flashed ominously at Allen. She saw him as an enemy now. “Gawrrr!”

“Mwa ha ha! You think you can beat me?! Come back in a hundred years!”

“Uhh, i-it’s not good to quarrel—eek?!”

Pulling Charlotte in with them, Allen and Roo started splashing each other, forgetting themselves as they played in the water.



After about half an hour of frolicking in the sea, Allen set up a parasol on the beach and laid out a picnic blanket in the shade. “All right,” he said, slapping his hands together to shake off the sand. “This looks good.”

Charlotte sat in a corner with a towel over her head. Her lips were slightly pallid, perhaps from being in the sea for too long.

“Maybe we went a bit too far. You can rest here,” he said.

“Y-Yes. But...it was so much fun!” she replied brightly.

“I’m glad.” He couldn’t help but smile to see her happy. It had been a good decision to come here, after all. Hooray for intense heat. At this point, the heat that had been so maddening seemed like the greatest gift—it was funny how that worked.

Still in a good mood, Allen pointed to the stalls. A variety of scents, mouthwatering and sweet, wafted over from that corner of the beach. “Wait here for a bit. I’ll go get some drinks or something. Roo,

you watch over Charlotte, all right? If anyone suspicious approaches her, you can eat them.”

“Woof woof!” Roo nodded confidently.

“N-No, you shouldn’t eat anyone!” Charlotte protested.

There were flirty youths all over the beach, and many of them were trying to pick someone up, but Allen felt assured that no one would be stupid enough to try to flirt with a girl accompanied by a Fenrir.

Free of worries, he headed to the stalls. Some were offering charcoal-grilled food, others sold frozen sweets, and there were so many different things to tempt the beachgoers. He was browsing through the stalls when someone called to him.

“Is that you, Mr. Crawford?!”

“Hm?” He turned around at the familiar voice and found someone waving to him from a particularly large stall. She was a mermaid with a coral ornament on her hair—the concierge from the hotel. Instead of her suit uniform, she was wearing an apron, fitting for a vendor at a stall.

“What brings you here?” he asked.

“Our hotel has a satellite stall here, of course.” A sign hung over the stall that read “The Yunoha Resort Pop-up.” The mermaid’s eyes sparkled as she beamed at Allen. “I see you’re enjoying those swimming suits already. Are you here with Miss Charlotte and little Fenrir as well?”

“Yes. Thanks for the surprise gift.”

“It’s *you* we want to thank. After your stay with us, Mr. Crawford, business at our hotel is skyrocketing!” she declared with a brilliant smile. Even the stall seemed to be flourishing. A number of staff were flurrying around to attend to the flood of orders. “We’ve adapted the spell you taught us, and we’re selling special drinks that stay icy cold even in this blazing sun. We’ve shared the spell with other vendors too, so we’re attracting more customers than ever before right now!”

“Th-That sounds great.” Allen was in awe of their shrewd business sense. In any case, they had a wide range of drinks on offer, and he could smell something appetizing in the air. If it was a popular stall, the food must be good. “I was just looking for something to get, actually. I’ll buy something from here.”

“Oh no, your money’s no good here. For you, it’s a special treat.”

“Hm, that’s nice of you... What’s that you’re selling there?” he asked, peering into the stall.

The staff were busy cooking up a storm, pouring some batter onto a pocked iron plate, popping in some mysterious ingredients, and rolling them up into steamy, round balls with bamboo sticks. He was astonished by the deft movements of their hands, but he had never

seen such a dish before.

“Of course, it’s takoyaki!” The mermaid announced proudly.

“Tako-what?”

“‘Tako’ means octopus. You put chopped pieces of octopus into the batter, and you roll it into these perfect balls.”

Though the mermaid explained it like it was the most natural thing in the world, Allen was stunned. Did she really mean *octopus*? That weird, slimy, twisty creature that slithered in the sea? He couldn’t help but frown at the image in his head. “You eat octopus? Have you lost your mind?”

“Hee hee hee, you’re behind the times, Mr. Crawford. It’s a big hit around here! It’s quite a popular street food in a country in the east, you know.” She was right about its popularity—people were flocking to buy the takoyaki fresh off the grill. “These days, there’s been a lot of Giant Octopuses appearing in this area of the sea. They’ve sunk ships and wreaked havoc on people...but we thought, why not turn it into a local specialty?”

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, huh?” he remarked. “But...eating octopus?” From the way it sold, he could see it must be popular, but somehow, he couldn’t push the image of the slithering tentacles out of his head. “Hmm...maybe next time. I’ll just have some drinks for now.”

“Aww, you don’t know what you’re missing. But drinks it is, then.” The mermaid swiftly prepared some glasses of juice for Allen and Charlotte, and milk for Roo. The stall seemed to be prepared with all kinds of drinks, anticipating the customers’ needs as true hospitality professionals. “Here you are. Will you be enjoying the beach for the rest of the day?”

“That’s the plan, though Charlotte looks a little tired.” He explained that Charlotte didn’t have much physical strength to begin with, and she might get ill if she exerted herself too much.

“In that case...” the mermaid said, smiling from ear to ear, “I have just the thing for you.”

“Hm?”



Riding on “just the thing,” Allen, Charlotte, and Roo rowed out to sea.

Enjoying the gentle sway of the waves, Charlotte was all smiles. “Wow...I’ve never seen such a tiny boat before.”

“It’s a simple make, so we can’t stray too far from the shore,” he said.

“Gawrrr.”

The three of them were on a small rubber boat. It wasn’t just food

that the Yunoha Resort's stall offered; they also had toys and other equipment for having fun at the beach. Allen had bought the boat at their asking price and invited Charlotte on a little excursion.

The waves rolled peacefully. They felt as if they were snug in a cradle.

Charlotte peered into the sea and breathed an enchanted sigh.

"There's all kinds of fishies swimming around. It's beautiful."

"We're farther out now, so there are more species here."

Schools of fish swam leisurely under them—flashing red, blue, yellow, and many other colors. Roo looked down in curiosity too, but she didn't try to catch them. While Charlotte and Roo were engrossed in the view, Allen set up a simple roof over the boat, and they had a cool shade in no time.

He took out a thin blanket and grinned. "Once you've enjoyed the view to your heart's content, let's have a lazy nap here."

"Ah, a naughty pleasure we can only have at the sea!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Precisely. You're starting to master the art."

Though they'd enjoyed plenty of naps back at the mansion, it was their first opportunity to nap while floating on the sea. The trio lay down in the boat, with Charlotte in the middle. Since it was a little cramped, his arm almost brushed against hers—but he managed to avert the crisis by pulling a blanket between them.

Charlotte giggled, unaware of Allen's struggles. "I always thought the sea was for swimming and fishing, and things like that... I never knew we could enjoy it like this too."

"There's a lot more you can do—like observing creatures living in the rocks, or looking for seashells on the beach."

"That sounds lovely! Do you like doing that too?"

"Yeah. I used to do it all the time back in the day." When he closed his eyes, vivid memories came back to him. His foster family lived on a seaside similar to this one, and the sea was right behind their house. He often went out by himself to explore the shore. Of course, he had a single purpose: "If I was lucky, I'd find rare animals or seashells, and Uncle would buy them from me. It was an invaluable source of income for me before I started teaching at the school of magic."

"That...sounds just like you!" That was the most affirmative response Charlotte could muster.

They kept on talking lazily about this and that—reflecting on their recent adventures, Allen asking if she had everything she needed at the mansion, and so on. Charlotte wanted to hear about Allen's childhood in particular. Though he didn't think he had an especially entertaining childhood, he answered all her questions.

“And what about you?” he asked. “What was your childhood like?”

“Well...when I was living with my mother, there weren’t any children my age around us, so I played by myself most of the time.”

“Hm, like reading books?”

“Yes. I asked my mother to read the same picture book to me over and over again.” She slowly recounted her days with her late mother. Although her voice tended to grow tense whenever she spoke of the Duke’s family, her life with her mother seemed to live on inside her as a peaceful memory.

Someday, I’ll take her to her mother’s grave. He wanted to pay his respects to her mother too. He still didn’t know how he would introduce himself, but he could figure that out later. While he strengthened his resolve to make this happen in the future, Roo had fallen into a deep sleep, snoring lightly.

Charlotte gently stroked Roo’s head and spoke in a dreamy voice. “I have fond memories of those times...but I’m having a lot of fun with you too, Allen.”

“If you say so, I’m happy.” Allen let her words sink in. A little over a month had passed since she came into his life. In the beginning, he had proclaimed that he’d make her happy on the spur of the moment, but he’d never imagined she would be smiling so freely, full of joy.

Charlotte turned over on her side and looked at Allen. Her face, with a shy smile, was so close that his heart did a somersault. “You know so many things, Allen. Each day is full of surprises,” she said.

“W-Well, I’ve lived a few years more than you have...”

“When I get to the same age you are now, do you think I’ll be as knowledgeable as you?”

“Of course. In fact, you might be much wiser than me.”

“Hee hee... I really hope so.” Her murmur was soft and dreamy, and she seemed to be half in the world of dreams already. As Allen pulled up the blanket for her, she placed her own hand on his. “Say, Allen...” she began.

“Hm? What is it?”

“If...if it’s not too much trouble...” she murmured timidly, her hand still on his, looking up at him. “Could you...keep teaching me many more naughty pleasures?”

Allen froze, at a loss for words. For the two of them, it was just an ordinary conversation. But because she was in a bathing suit, the words took on a perverse meaning in his head.

Charlotte looked downcast. “Ah...I’m sorry. You’ve been taking care of me so much—I shouldn’t make such an improper request... It was silly of me.”

“No no no, not at all!” he blurted out. He squeezed her hand and said straight on, “I’ll always teach you all the pleasures of this world. So, uh...” *Will you be with me forever?* The words almost slipped out, but he swallowed them back. “So...you can look forward to it.”

She was round-eyed in surprise for a few moments, but her face softened into a smile. Then she gave a small yawn.

Allen smirked as she rubbed her eyes, and said, “Go on, you can give in—” But he suddenly fell silent.

“Allen? Is...anything wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing.” Allen smiled, stroking her hair. She was probably too drowsy to notice how he rose a little and glanced around their boat. “Good night, Charlotte. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night...Allen,” she mumbled, closing her eyes.

In that instant, a spine-chilling roar thundered in the air, and an enormous wave rose all around them. It seemed to crash into their boat—but the boat didn’t sink, or even look too bothered by the turbulence.

Allen merely shrugged. “An ambush? How brash.” A spherical barrier surrounded the boat. It was not only watertight, but also perfectly soundproof, and there was only minimal swaying from the wave. Charlotte slept on peacefully.

“Grrrr...” Roo had woken up.

“Hey, Roo. Ready to fight?” Allen patted Roo’s head and looked all around them.

The sky had suddenly become covered in heavy clouds, as if a violent tempest was about to hit. And from the ocean as dark as midnight, there emerged a monstrous octopus. Its reddish black tentacles writhed, and it was glaring straight at the boat. No less than ten octopuses were approaching them, generating turbulent waves.

Allen remembered the mermaid’s anecdote about Giant Octopuses. Apparently, their boat had drifted into their nest.

“Hah... For a mere mollusk, you’ve got some nerve to attack us!” Though they were in a life-or-death situation, Allen laughed mercilessly. He had no intention of holding back, for he had a good reason to pummel them to a pulp. “How dare you attempt to ruin Charlotte’s nap! It’s unpardonable! I’ll blast you into smithereens!”

“Gawr!”

Allen and Roo leaped into a fierce battle with the pack of Giant Octopuses.

Two hours later, Charlotte was stirring in the boat with a yawn.

“Good morning. Looks like you slept well,” Allen said with a warm smile.

“Yes, it was so nice—eep?!” She let out a cry when she looked around her. The boat was on the beach, and right in front of her, piled

up in the shallows, were heaps of enormous octopuses. “Wh-What in the world happened to them?”

“Oh nothing, there was just a little commotion after you fell asleep. Roo and I made a clean sweep of them.”

“I-I see... I didn’t notice any of it.”

“Woof!” Roo snuggled up to her, eager for her praise.

“Hee hee, you’ve been busy too, Roo. Good girl.” She rubbed Roo’s head and looked around. “But I wonder...what’s everyone eating?”

“Ah...well...”

A big crowd of people were gathered on the beach, chatting and enjoying something freshly cooked—the steaming round takoyaki that the mermaid had told him about.

“Mr. Crawford!” The mermaid approached them with a big smile and grabbed Allen’s hand in an enthusiastic handshake.

“Hello there,” he said.

“Thank you so much for everything! I don’t know how to thank you for dealing with all the octopuses at once.”

“Don’t mention it—it just happened to turn out that way.”

“But I must do something to thank you. How about...I give you this!” She held out a box of takoyaki.

“I knew it...” Allen sighed.

Since Allen had hunted down the octopuses, they were whipping up takoyaki at full speed and offering it for free to all the beachgoers.

“What is it?” asked Charlotte. “It smells delicious...”

“It’s takoyaki, of course! With octopus inside,” the mermaid explained.

“O-Octopus?!” Charlotte stared wide-eyed.

Allen supposed that, just like him, Charlotte had never even thought about eating an octopus, so he started to decline politely.

“Uh, I think we’ll pass—”

“Thank you, I’ll try it!” Charlotte said before he could finish.

“Huh?!”

Without hesitation, she popped one into her mouth, chewed it carefully for a while, then smiled from ear to ear. “It’s hot, but...so yummy!”

“Thank you very much! I’m so pleased you like it.” The mermaid nodded in satisfaction.

Allen could only look on in shock. “You’re brave... An octopus? Really?”

“Well, I was a little surprised...” Charlotte nibbled on the takoyaki then smiled shyly. “But I thought I should be less frightened and try new things, if I want to be like you, Allen. So I tried mustering up my courage!”

“I see...” he said.

“Oh, would you like some too, little Roo? Here you go.”

“Woof, gruffle gruffle.” Roo had one too, huffing and puffing with the hot food.

Allen felt deeply moved. He felt like a parent watching his young one leaving the nest. *She’s grown so strong now... What if I run out of things to teach her?* The thought cast a cloud over his heart. But it was soon blown away when Charlotte picked up a takoyaki from a new box and held it out to him.

“Would you like to try one too, Allen? It’s a naughty pleasure!”

“Well...you’re right.” He laughed lightly. In order to discover more things to teach Charlotte, all he needed to do was challenge himself to try new things too. It was that simple.

“Ah, please do be careful,” said the mermaid hastily. “Those are the latest batch, so it’s piping hot—”

Without heeding her warning, Allen chomped on the ball and yelled out, “Aggh!!! Hot!” then broke into a coughing fit.

“Allen?! Are you okay?!”

“Woof?”

And so, this became his memory of a summer day that he couldn’t quite conclude in style.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Fukada Sametarou. I'm a shark, or "same" in Japanese—in fact, a skillful fish who learned how to breathe through gills, came up on shore, and is now typing away with pectoral fins as we speak. I am very happy that you picked up this volume, *I'm Giving the Disgraced Noble Lady I Rescued a Crash Course in Naughtiness* (abbreviated title).

This novel is the first piece of work that I posted on the self-publishing website, *Shosetsuka ni Naro*. Despite the title, it's a perfectly wholesome, laid-back story, so if any of you started reading it expecting something more racy, I sincerely apologize. Maybe I'm on the safe side, though, because of the subtitle?

When I first came up with this story, it was about a noble lady who is expelled from home and goes on to enjoy naughty pleasures, and Charlotte was the protagonist. Allen held a sidekick position as a wicked wizard who's well informed about naughty things. I started writing the story in this framework, but it didn't feel right. Then I decided to swap the main and supporting characters around, and the story became what it is now.

This received a surprisingly enthusiastic response, and it eventually turned into a book.

I would like to thank all my readers who supported me along the way. Thank you also to my readers who found this story for the first time in this book! A book only comes alive when someone is there to read it. I am grateful that something brought you to this story.

I would like to thank the wonderful artist Sakura Miwabe. The cover is bursting with life and just exquisite (down to the smallest details!), not to mention the illustrations inside the book, which are so exciting to see with all the expressive characters. Thank you very much for contributing your art in your busy schedule!

And finally, I am indebted to my dear editor, K. Thank you for coming all the way to Kansai for our meetings. I look forward to working with you in the future too!

At the same time as this book's release, the manga version will start streaming on the *Comic PASH!* website. Ichiho Katsura has turned it into a cute, lively comic, so please check it out. I'm already enjoying the series as a reader instead of an author.

I hope to see you again in the second volume.

Greetings from Fukada Sametarou.

Fukada Sametarou



Bonus Short Story

A Naughty Shop

One day, as the sun was setting, Allen stood in an expansive field in a corner of the city, resting an imitation sword on his shoulder and looking up at the sky.

"It's sunset already. Let's wrap it up." He casually wiped the sweat from his brow, then threw a spine-chilling look at the array of men sprawled out on the ground around him. "Hey, are you listening? Training is done for the day. Where's your response?"

"Please...wait...a second..."

"I...just...can't...I'm dying..."

They gasped out the words and groaned. Though clearly fatigued, they were uninjured—at least, they weren't bleeding. Most of them sported only bruises and bumps, but they were all lying limp like corpses. Magus and Groh lay side by side, casting a begrudging look on Allen.

"I mean, we did ask you to train us, but still..." Magus grumbled.

"There's a limit to everything..." Groh muttered.

"It only goes to show how much more training you need," Allen declared. "Already exhausted at this level? You should be ashamed of yourselves." Without a hint of remorse, he fixed them with a look that was absolute-zero frigid.

This morning, he had transformed into a drill sergeant from hell. Allen had bullied about thirty men—Groh's and Magus's adventuring parties combined—under the guise of training. But even after all that, he looked calm and collected, as though everything had been a breeze.

"Really, not one of you could hit me even a single time, even when you all came at me together—it's disgraceful." He shrugged in disappointment. "Compared to you lot, I'd say amoebas are better at learning—"

"Hi Allen!" A lighthearted voice cut off his scathing lecture.

Allen's face brightened up instantly. "Charlotte!" He ran straight toward Charlotte, who was waving at him with a smile. Not a trace of the savage drill sergeant remained; he was more like a loyal dog wagging his tail at his owner.

Groh and Magus, still lying on the ground, exchanged looks.

"We got crushed by *that*?"

"Don't even go there..." Groh grumbled.

They looked utterly drained. Slowly, Groh got up and glowered at Allen's back with a sigh. "Dammit... I just can't let him knock me around without biting back. We gotta make him pay somehow."

"Forget about it. We're no match for him even if we band together. It's obvious."

"Ugh...sure, you might be right. But it doesn't matter how strong he is—it just drives me up the wall when a kid like him has the cheek to say whatever the hell he wants."

Since Magus remembered Allen's lessons from his time at the Athena School of Magic, he was used to Allen's ways. But Groh had only met Allen recently, and his spirit of rebellion hadn't been extinguished yet.

"Shit, Magus. You knew him a long time ago, right? Don't you know his weak spot or something?"

"Well, back then, I tried to stay away from him as much as I could..."

"Dammit, you're useless!" Groh growled. "Though I get why you'd want to avoid him."

Groh was going on and on grumbling about Allen, with Magus nodding along, when Allen called to them. "Hey, you two."

The pair jumped. "Yessir?!" When they cautiously turned around, Allen was observing them with a disgruntled expression. They broke out in a cold sweat, wondering if he had heard their backbiting, but he spoke in a calm tone.

"Do you know of any good diners around here?"

"Oh. Diners?" said Magus.

"Aren't you going home with the dear goddess?" Groh asked, noticing her absence.

"She's eating out with Miach and Eluka. A 'girls' night out,' apparently."

So Charlotte had only dropped by before heading to the restaurant. Scratching his head, Magus said, "Let's see. Well, there's a joint on the main street—"

"Stop right there!" Groh intervened with gusto. He jumped up to his feet and closed in on Allen. "I know just the place for you! I'll take you there!"

"Really? You can be my guide then." Allen turned to the others slumped on the ground and started shaking them. "Come on, get up! It's time you went home!"

Some of them screamed in terror, but Magus had no time to worry about his henchmen. "Hey, Groh...you're plotting something, aren't you?"

"Duh! I thought of a plan to make him regret what he did to us..."

"A plan?"

“Oh yeah! It clicked when I saw the dear goddess just now. You know how that dirty Dark Overlord turns into a completely different guy in front of her?”

“Yeah...what about it?”

“That’s his weak spot—women!” Groh declared, brimming with confidence.

Magus cocked his head dubiously. “What?”



Later that evening, Allen, Magus, and Groh arrived at a large bar in a corner of the city. Dazzling lights poured out from inside, dispelling the darkness of the night. There was a real buzz about the place. And no wonder—it was one of the most infamous bars in the city.

The glittering interior was lined with spacious sofas, and scantily clad female staff were entertaining the customers. “Come on in! ♡” the girls called out. “Oh no, you might be my type. ♡” “Aww, leaving already? Stay a little bit longer, let’s keep chatting! ♡” In short, it was a “night entertainment” kind of bar.

Allen grimaced as he was led to a corner of the room. “I only wanted to get some food...?”

“Oh, wait till you see their fare, it’s prepared by a top chef who trained in a first-rate restaurant. I guarantee it’s going to taste amazing!” Groh babbled.

“Hm...very well.” Allen flipped through the menu, glancing around him. Though his face was usually rather sullen, his brow was especially furrowed now. “I don’t really like bars like this...”

“Ah, really?” Groh replied with a suppressed snicker, then got up abruptly. “Well then, we’ll just go and say hello to some of the girls here! Feel free to order without us.”

“Huh? Hey, hang on—”

Groh cut Allen off, grabbing Magus by the arm. “Come on, Magus!”

“Uh, right...”

Groh pulled Magus deeper into the back of the bar. Once they reached a shadowy corner, Groh grinned and did a fist pump. “Told you! Just like I thought! Dudes putting on airs like him always melt in front of girls—that’s the way it goes!”

“Looks like you’re right...” Magus rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then smirked. “Come to think of it, he’s famous for being antisocial. And I never heard any rumors about him and girls back then... So what are you gonna do next?”

“Obviously, there’s only one thing left to do. I’ve already asked the bar to send a couple of girls over to him.”

“Gotcha! So we watch him get rattled from a distance!”

The whole plan was in rather poor taste. But for the two of them, whom Allen had pounded to the ground all day, it was the kind of scenario that would let them blow off steam.

“And get this,” Groh chuckled. “Most of the girls here are descended from succubi, and they use charms to bewitch customers! They can knock out the most reclusive cynic!”

“Heh heh heh... Can’t wait to see his cool mask get torn off!”

As they were sharing a malicious laugh, they heard high-pitched exclamations coming from the direction of their table. Evidently, their scheme of revenge was now in motion. They looked at each other and peered out at the table from the shadows, where they expected to see beautiful women making advances on Allen and throwing him into confusion—but that wasn’t what they found.

A dozen gorgeous women—wearing seductive outfits, through which bat-like wings or black tails flicked out—were flocking around Allen.

“Ooh! You’re so much fun! ♡”

“What about me? Can you check me next?”

“Hey, me first!”

“No matter, just line up,” Allen sighed. There was positively a harem surrounding him, but he was dealing with them indifferently while sipping his drink.

“What the hell is that?!” Groh whispered furiously. “Since when is he having an extravagant banquet?!”

“D-Don’t ask me!” They were both stunned by the scene unfolding before them.

One of the women sat down next to Allen and turned to him with an alluring, sultry look. “Oooh. ♡ I think I’m a little tipsy. ♡” She leaned against his shoulder, making her dress slip and exposing her cleavage. It was a deadly attack that would have certainly knocked out any man in an instant.

“Hey, you,” said Allen, narrowing his eyes sharply at her.

“Hmm?”

He pointed straight at her and declared, “You get a failing grade! Strengthening your spell with skin-on-skin contact? Despicable! If you’re a *real* succubus, try bewitching me with a mere glance!”

“Ack... You sound just like our instructor!”

“I’m only telling the truth. Don’t think you can get by with such a mediocre spell!”

Allen was straight-up lecturing the women.

“What in the world...” Groh and Magus could only watch them in confusion.

The other girls jumped into the conversation excitedly. “But still, isn’t it worth it if we can bewitch our customers with a little bit of

touching? It'll bring in more profit too."

"Don't be stupid. If you can cast the charm with just a look, imagine how much more you can sell. You should maximize your efficiency to catch more prey."

"That totally makes sense! Tell us more!" The beautiful women all listened with shining eyes and took notes.

"Seriously..." Allen let out a heavy sigh. "That's why I don't like coming to bars like this. I can't help meddling when I see everyone's half-assed bewitching charms."

"*That's* why you don't like it?!" Groh and Magus had to jump out and shout at him.

"Hm?" Allen cocked his head—but he understood their intentions in an instant and sneered. "I see. You wanted to make me a laughing stock, is that it?"

"Ugh... I-I don't know what you're talking about..." Groh muttered.

Allen chuckled. "Hmph. No need to pretend. I can see right through you."

He didn't seem to have been offended, so Magus and Groh tentatively sat back down at the table in awkward disappointment. "Well...to tell you the truth, we thought you were weak with women, Dark Overlord," said Magus.

"Thought you must be the type to freak out in front of women," Groh added.

"You better watch your mouth." Allen downed his drink as he glared at them. "I don't change the way I am just because I'm talking to a woman. Too bad your scheme failed."

"But...you're so meek when you're with the dear goddess," Groh protested.

"Not at all. I'm perfectly normal. Nothing unusual," Allen said coolly.

"That's *normal*?" Groh and Magus winced.

The women gathered around them started complaining to get his attention back. "Hey, are you gonna teach us more about bewitching charms?"

"Sure, I wouldn't mind. And while I'm at it, I can brew a love potion that doesn't have any side effects. Want me to sell it to your bar wholesale?"

"Really?! Hang on, I'll go ask the boss!" exclaimed one.

"Are you interested in becoming our consultant? It pays pretty well," said another.

"I'm not especially in need of money..." Allen shrugged. "But it might be a good way to kill time. Let's get as close as possible to the legal borderline and squeeze money out of those idiots!"

“Oooh! Love the way you talk! ♥” The women were going wild. However glamorous and gorgeous they looked, they had the gleaming eyes of carnivorous beasts on a hunt.

Groh and Magus exchanged dark looks. “We shouldn’t have brought him here...” “I gotta stay away from this bar now...”

Just then, they heard an anxious voice. “Is that you...Allen?”

Allen froze in place at the sound. “Huh?!”

When they turned around, Charlotte, Eluka, and Miach were standing there. Charlotte was looking around curiously at the bar, but the other two were eyeing Allen as if he was a squashed bug.

“Uh, wh-why...what are you doing here?!” he stammered.

“I mean, we were just having dinner nearby. We heard a familiar voice, so we looked in...and here we are,” Eluka said.

“Well, well. The Dark Lord looks like he’s having quite a lotta fun,” Miach added. The two girls glanced at each other and commenced a whispered discussion.

Meanwhile, Charlotte tilted her head and asked, “Um, Allen, what kind of place is this?”

“Uh, w-well...it’s...um...”

“To put it simply,” Miach cut in, “it’s kind of like...a social club for men where they can drink and have fun with the ladies who work here.”

“Oh, um... I-I see...” Charlotte blushed a deep red and looked away from Allen. Glancing at the beautiful women around him, she murmured in a thin voice, “Um, I don’t want to interrupt you, so I’ll go back to the mansion first—”

“No! It’s not what you think, Charlotte!!! I’m only here ’cause these two brought me here!” He scrambled to his feet and grasped Charlotte’s hand, talking rapidly. “All right, let’s go home! Right now! Wait, do you want to get some cake on the way? Let’s go get your favorite, a strawberry shortcake. Why don’t we do that? Do you want to? Tell me!”

“Umm, I’m...already full...”

“Then we can get some for tea time tomorrow! I’ve got a sudden urge to have cake rather than alcohol! How about it?”

Charlotte was quiet for a few moments, but she smiled faintly and gave a small nod. “Okay...”

Allen sighed in relief, but the bar’s women booed. “What, you’re going already?! You haven’t taught us the powerful bewitching charm yet!”

“Ugh, I’ll come back another day! Keep training yourself until then!”

“Aww too bad...he’s taken, huh,” one of the girls grumbled.

“I was thinking I’d go for him even if it wasn’t for work,” another

one muttered.

Though the beautiful women were vocal about their disappointment, Allen paid them no attention. He strode out of the bar with Charlotte in tow. Eluka and Miach followed after them looking exasperated.

The women dispersed, leaving Magus and Groh by themselves at the table.

“So his weak spot isn’t women in general...”

“Just his favorite one.”

They poured each other the little bit of alcohol that was still left in the bottles and let out a ponderous sigh.



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I'm Giving the Disgraced Noble Lady I Rescued a Crash Course in Naughtiness: I'll Spoil Her with Delicacies and Style to Make Her the Happiest Woman in the World! Volume 1

by Fukada Sametarou

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Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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IKENAIKOTO WO OSHIEKOMU ~OISHI MONO WO TABESASETE
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~ ” 1

by Fukada Sametarou

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